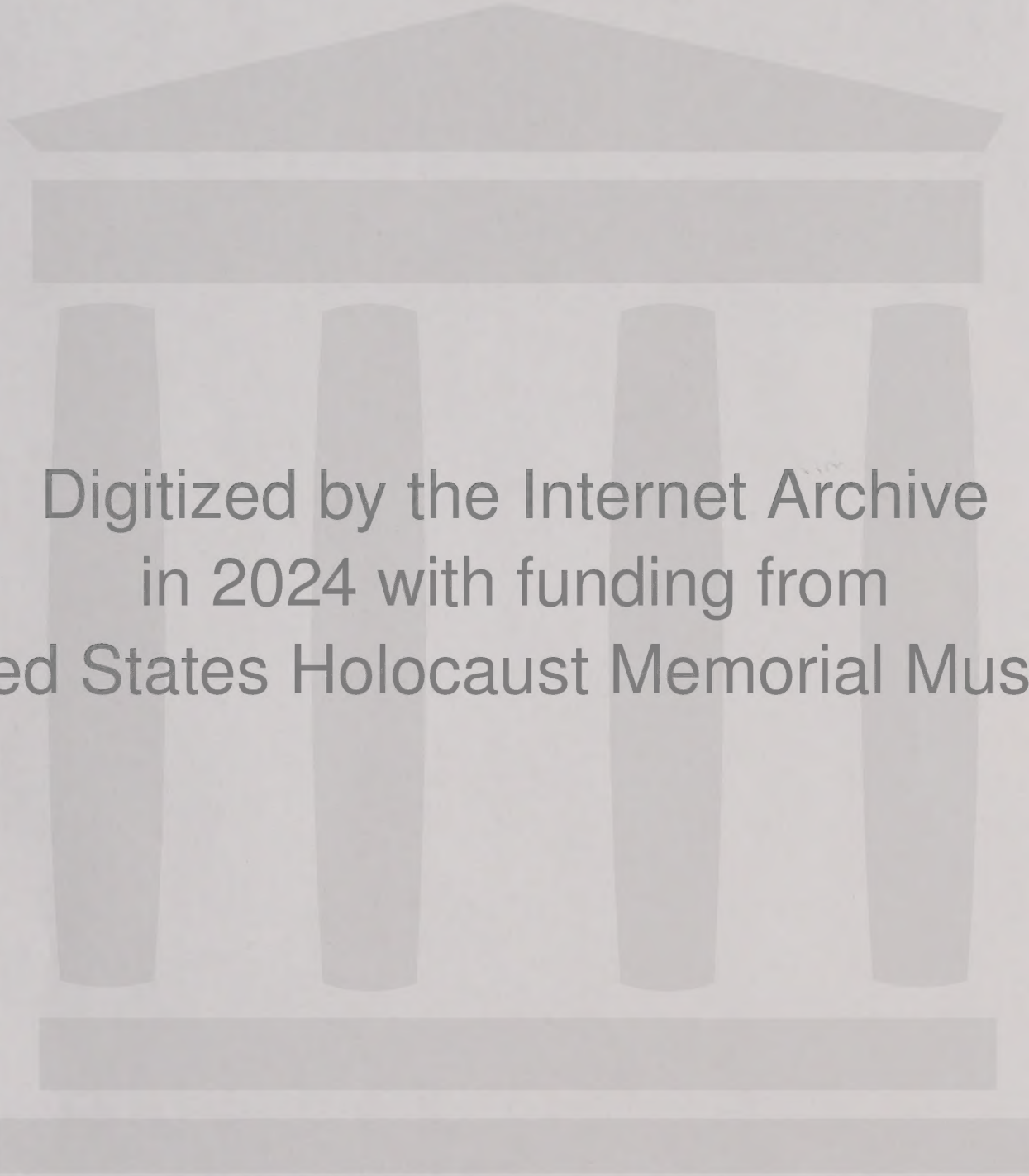




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Harold Saunders

...and far was Justice.

Memories of childhood: Before Auschwitz and beyond.

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לזכרם - In Memoriam

For my sons DAVID and SIMON

and

To the memory of my dear, honoured, departed parents

Leo and Francisca Salamon

(יהודה בן בנימין ופרומע בת אהרון)

to the memory of my beloved little sister

Renata (Renka) (רבקה)

whose life was cut short at the moment of its budding by a viciously monstrous and subhuman regime and its willing executioners.

But also

LEST WE FORGET

TO THE MEMORY OF ALL WHO PERISHED.

על מקומם יבואו בשלום

In Memoriam - לזיכרם



1889 -1973



1889 -1944



1930-1944

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The attitude of nations vis-à-vis a defenceless
minority is the moral barometer of our civilisation.

Albert Einstein.

[A speech delivered at the Savoy Hotel, London.
29th October, 1930. Published in: Mein Weltblick.
Querido Verlag, Amsterdam (1934)].

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A PERSONAL NOTE TO MY SONS BY WAY OF EXPLANATION

i.

I have become aware of you both showing some interest in your roots and heritage. You suggested that I should write down my war time experience before these memories die with me.

I am of the holocaust generation and my narrative forms a minuscule part of the total experience. Despite the passing of time, I still find it intellectually difficult to understand and comprehend the enormity of the holocaust. The dreadful question “WHY” still haunts me at times. It should not, therefore, be surprising that I have shied away from exploring the past. It is, perhaps, a subconscious fear of recalling traumas. From time to time glimpses enter consciousness - they are isolated staccato memories and I rarely try to establish a link between them.

Not surprisingly, my feeling about recording my memories has, therefore, been ambivalent. On the one hand, there was the personal need that my Jewish heritage and “tribal” experience should not be completely submerged in the sea of a gentile world, mostly lost to my children and completely disappear in the generations beyond. The martyrdom and agonies which my own ancestors (and yours) suffered to keep faith with the past would have been in vain. If it is I who breaks the link in an historic chain going back some millennia it would be like severing a branch from an ancient tree. On the other hand, I wished the future generations to break free of the “wandering Jew” syndrome, to be able to make deep roots within a society, to be naturally accepted and not be on tolerance by a liberally minded society in one generation and cruelly persecuted by a bigoted one, in the next. The thought also occurred that your attitudes would be coloured and distorted by recollections of traumas suffered by your father but not endured by you; I was concerned that such vicarious experiences would cause prejudices of which I wished you to be free.

Statements by ultra-right and ultra-left groups and individuals (many of whom, I believe, practise anti-Semitism under the euphemistic guise of anti Zionism) maintain that the story of the holocaust is just that, a fairy tale that never took place, a perfidious Jewish/Zionist invention, a ruse to dupe the world. This and the resurgence of anti-Semitism gives me the impetus to attempt to relate my story to you and, in time, if you so wish it, through you to my grandchildren, so that they, at least, will not doubt the authenticity and that my story may be an object lesson to them which shows where intolerance and discrimination of human beings, can lead to.

Question: should I relate only events relevant to my concentration camp experiences or should I also give the flavour of the milieu in which I grew up, tell of events not directly connected with the holocaust but which, like a Greek tragedy, relentlessly lead up to a catastrophic resolution?

My personal history runs parallel, in general respects, to the experience of European Jewry throughout modern history. Hence, the history of my people, my background, my childhood and my concentration camp experience form a continuum. The latter can be told but cannot be fully understood without the

former. To make sense, events that one describes cannot be disassociated from the social, temporal and political climate in which they occurred nor from what preceded such events. If the connection between cause and effect is severed then the exercise is of no real value nor can it shed any significant light on the life experience one proposes to describe. Unless one understands what has gone before one cannot understand what historically led up to people going to their slaughter without showing much resistance. (As an aside, one can also ask the obverse to this question: what makes individuals and nations so full of hatred that they are ready to acquiesce to and commit inhumane acts that culminate in genocide?) To this end it becomes imperative to tell of the experience of being a Jewish child before the catastrophe as a preamble to the story of the holocaust.

Therefore, to better understand some politically formative childhood experiences it is necessary to set the stage and paint the backdrop against which the actors performed. In fact, to describe the background of socio-political movements in the Jewish community. This is not meant to be an exhaustive historical analysis of the local Jewish microcosm and the portrayal is, of necessity, superficial; no more than a finger nail portrait of a scene viewed by my young self and painted from memory in old age.

My story spans two decades. The first ten years are characterised by the gathering storm and the second by the tempest. The first period starts with the rise of Hitler and finishes with the annexation of Austria in 1938; the second ends with my return from the concentration camp, the end of the war and some 30-40 million dead world-wide. Six million of the dead were Jews; amongst them your grandmother and aunt and many of my uncles, aunts and cousins, not to mention friends. A third of world Jewry had been exterminated like so much vermin.

During the period that I describe I was either a child or a very young adolescent and I had no overall view of the situation: the political and social backgrounds that I describe are taken from published sources¹.

Children do not rationalise experiences, they internalise them. This affects not only their immediate reaction to changing circumstances but it also modifies their opinion of people they meet. I am, therefore, aware that since all experience is subjective, the opinions I formed of people, places and happenings reflect my own mental and emotional state at that time. I hope that I do not thereby cause any injustice to the living or to those now dead.

I hope that writing this may have a cathartic effect on me and, having promised myself as a teenager not to let the world forget, it may assuage my feeling of guilt for having kept quiet for so long.

¹ Dr. Oskar Neumann. Im Schatten des Todes. Olamenu (1956) Tel-Aviv.

ii.

Considering the important factors that made me the “I” that I am, there is little doubt that, genetic influences apart, it is first and foremost the fact that I was born and brought up as a Jew.

I consider my Jewishness as the most formative influence and the most important. Through my Jewishness I inherited values which formed me, influenced my thinking and actions and gave me a *Weltanschauung*. It taught me that I was my brother’s keeper and he mine. By “Jewishness” I do not just mean religion or, what amongst Jews is known as “*Yiddishkeit*”, but also the experience of being made to feel different. Different by the world at large in the sense of “inferior” and of being of a lesser breed, constantly having to apologise for being a Jew which often led to an attempt to disguise that fact. Different by my Jewish upbringing in the sense of being “chosen” and therefore more important. It taught me the tribal memory of persecutions past and instructed me that the collective suffering and martyrdom was a divine retribution on the whole House of Israel for not keeping His laws, ordinances and covenant. My upbringing also told me of the great achievements of many Jews in all fields of human endeavour. I shone in the reflected glory; it made me proud to be a Jew. I was torn by two conflicting sentiments of my Jewishness: the denial and the acceptance, the onus and the honour.

iii

At night when I cannot sleep I let my mind wander, as one does in the dark. It helps me to recall the times that were. I day-dream of the pleasant and have bad dreams of the distressing. I have lucid recollections of my youth and a multitude of memories come trickling back to mind. When I pluck the past out of my unconscious and bring it back into memory, then, like the witch of *Endor*¹, I call forth faces and voices of children, of youths and of adults who all died an untimely and unnatural death. I bring their spectres back into life to remind me of the past. I am saddened by the loss of so much human potential. Vast genetic pools were destroyed, cruelly, with much malice and incinerated. The Jewish Scriptures teach that he who destroys a single human life is deemed to have destroyed an entire world². How many Einsteins and Menuhins and Chagalls, how many Pissarros and Mendelssohns and Neils Bohrs, how much artistry, how many discoveries that would have advanced the human race will never be made because of this? How many worlds did the nazis destroy? Six million!

Here then are some reminders of a lost childhood that an old man recalls.

¹ Samuel I, 28:7

² Sanhedrin 4:5

CHILDHOOD

My "Home" Town.

I intentionally placed home in inverted commas. I consider Bratislava as the town of my birth; it is not the town with which I emotionally identify. If I feel nostalgia, it is for my lost childhood not for the town that only survives in my memory. It is the town that evokes sad memories. Its inhabitants discriminated against me. Its government knowingly sold me and my people down the river to be exterminated. I may feel sentimental about the town of my childhood; I have no sentiment for the town that deprived me of it.

I left Bratislava for England on the 27th January 1946, nearly one year to the day that I walked out of the Blechhammer concentration camp as a free man. I visited the town for a few brief days in July 1947. Although most of the people I once knew had perished in the holocaust and there were not many familiar faces to be seen, my old haunts were still there and the physical appearance of the town had hardly changed. On my next visit, 53 years later, I found that most of the district where the Jews had lived was razed to the ground and most of it still lies derelict. The Schreibergasse, a street named after the famous Chatam Sofer, (Schreiber)¹ had been renamed after a Catholic saint. Even the old Jewish cemeteries were levelled. It is as if the powers that be were not satisfied with having been instrumental in the extermination of its Jews they also wanted to obliterate all physical traces of their past presence in the city.

To this day there is no sign of repentance for their criminal actions during the war or even acceptance of the guilt but much self-exoneration amongst its citizens; worst of all, there is not even an acknowledgement of their responsibility, blaming others for it. It appears that in the course of the last half century since I left my native country, the attitude of a large section of the population of Slovakia towards Jews has changed little. In some quarters, there does not even seem to be an attempt of facing up to the past and of coming to terms with it.² In Germany the truth about what had happened under the Third Reich - and what the nation had done - was confronted with excruciating honesty; Slovakia, just like Austria, tries to represent itself as a victim of nazism rather than its willing handmaiden.

Bratislava is a pre-Roman settlement with Celtic remains having been found in its vicinity. It is well positioned having the broad sweep of the Danube to the south, the foothills of the Small Carpathians to the West, the broad valley between the Small Carpathians and the Low Tatras to the north and the north-east and the opening to the wide Hungarian plain to the south-east. The old town lies on the undulating castle hill. Vineyards rise from the embankment

¹ Both names translate as Scribe.

² Pavol Mešťan. Anti-Semitism in Slovak Politics (1989-1999), Slovak National Museum (2000), Bratislava

up the hillside which is crowned by a four turreted castle. The tall spire of the Gothic cathedral is juxtaposed in the narrow valley of the embankment below.

Despite its favourable and pleasant location, world history has passed Bratislava by. This is most probably because Vienna is just down the road and Budapest no more than 100 miles away. The changing political fortunes of the town is reflected in the change of its name through the centuries - Pressburg, Pozsony, Bratislava. Its only claim to more than local fame lies in the fact that in the 16th century when Islam moved westward and Sultan Suleiman stood in front of the gates of Vienna, Pozsony became the capital of Hungary and remained so until 1848. Several Habsburgs were crowned kings and queens of Hungary in its cathedral. In 1805 Napoleon signed the "peace treaty of Pressburg" in what is now the old town hall.

The earliest documents that refer to Jewish settlement in the villages and the castle area which later formed the town, dates to 1092. It is therefore, certain that settlement must have started at an earlier time. Since then, Jewish residence was mainly uninterrupted except for the occasional few years or decades at most, in different centuries, when Jews were expelled either from the town or from the castle area. The last time when Bratislava was declared "*Judenrein*"¹ was of course, between the end of 1944 and the end of the war, May 1945.

There were massacres of Jews when marauding crusader passed through and there was joint enterprise with other inhabitants when threatened by outsiders. There were times of stability and times of tension; laws that were fair and laws designed to annoy, disadvantage and ridicule. In 1291 King Andreas III issued a "charter of liberty" which gave the Jews of the town the same rights, privileges and responsibilities as other inhabitants. More often there was discrimination: an edict which forbade Jews to grow beards was not rescinded until 1783. There was penal taxation - a toll on crossing the bridge over the Danube was levied only on Jews; Jews were required to pay special taxes, an imposition revived in the twentieth century. An edict named "*Judentracht*"² dated 1375 required Jews to be identified by the clothes they wore. They were compelled to wear a long pointed hat, a red cloak with a large yellow circular disc. Surely, a precursor of the yellow star that I had sewn on my outer garment a few centuries later.

However, at the time of my childhood, before the Second World War, Bratislava was the provincial capital of Slovakia with a population of some 140,000 of which about 10% were Jews. There was a similar number of Protestants and the rest were Roman Catholic. The different religious and national groups of the town lived together if not in constant amity and brotherly love, at least in mutual toleration, most times. This social stability was in no small measure aided by the tolerance of a liberal democracy guided by its founder president Tomáš G. Masaryk. In my narrow childhood experience it appeared that the social intercourse between the different

¹ German: Cleansed of Jews.

² German: Jews' Apparel

communities was limited and rested mainly in commercial contacts. All my friends were Jews and I knew only few gentile children until I attended a state secondary school. I should imagine, however, that amongst the many sophisticated and assimilated Jews of the town the social intercourse between the various groups must have been much greater. After all, there were quite a few interfaith marriages.

For all this, Jews had, what was, for that time, the reasonable fear of being on tolerance and that any activity could give the goyim¹ a pretext for anti-Semitic outpourings. Not that the anti-Semites needed any excuse to hate the Jews. The fact that we were Jews seemed sufficient reason. The general mood of the plebs is well reflected in a report about the turbulent revolution year 1848. Then, the yoke of monarchical serfdom was overthrown and a general mood, going back to the French revolution, of Equality, Liberty and Fraternity, was established. *“Notwithstanding the general mood of fraternisation, in Pressburg the Jews were driven back into the ghetto. The citizenry cried: ‘What sort of freedom would that be if we cannot expel the Jews’. The citizens of 1848 in their thinking were no better in their method, much worse and more forcible, than their ancestors who, in 1526, had organised the expulsion of the Jews”*². As we now know, so was the virulent anti-Semitism of their descendants one hundred years later, in 1942.

Kehillah Kedosha Pressburg.³

From the Jewish point of view Pressburg is of great historical significance. During the 18th century, one of the town's chief rabbis was the renowned talmudic scholar Schreiber commonly known by his Hebrew name Chatam Sofer. He established a world renowned *Yeshiva*⁴ and a rabbinical dynasty. Pressburg became an important Jewish cultural centre and the Jewish historical significance of the town is mainly due to him. To reflect the historical importance of that personage to the town generally, a street, the Schreibergasse, was named after him.

I would like to portray the ambience of Bratislava and the flavour of its Jewish community at the time of my childhood.

There were no residential restriction for Jews: the wooden barriers that separated the ghetto from the rest of the town came down in 1849. From the castle towards the Danube the town had a very old, rather dilapidated but distinctive quarter. The district had some baroque houses and one specially well preserved example of a rococo building within its confine. A narrow swathe of houses in this area was, in the wider meaning of the word, the Jewish ghetto. It had two main roads at right angles to each other with the

¹ Yiddish: Gentiles. Originally from the Hebrew meaning "people" or "nations".

² Die Juden und die Judengemeinde Bratislava in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart. Page 8. Editor: Hugo Gold. Published by: Jüdischer Buchverlag, Brünn, (1932). (Extract translated from the German by the author).

³ The holy congregation of Pressburg (Bratislava).

⁴ A rabbinical seminary.

Judengasse¹ as its main axis. The streets were winding and narrow, the cobbled roadway and pavements narrow and uneven. Little lanes radiated from this street at all angles and inclinations. Some, climbing along narrow steps rose steeply towards the castle walls. Other lanes fell away towards the cathedral which stood at the lower limit and to one side of the Judengasse. In these side streets, the bulk of the Jewish proletariat and most of the lower middle class lived by choice and of necessity. Most other Jews resided within its close proximity or within the old medieval town with its renaissance buildings. The well-to-do and “modern” orthodox Jewish business families, the *Fabrikanten*², the *Engrossisten*³ and the professionals inclined to leave the self imposed ghetto. They had moved out of the area that nurtured their parents and now lived in smart modern apartments outside this confine or in detached villas in the verdant areas in the foothills of the Small Carpathians.

In my early childhood nearly all traffic was horse drawn; wagons or fiacres which had to negotiate these roads, rattled and clattered along noisily, swaying slightly from side to side. The stucco plaster on the facades of buildings was crumbling: this gave an impression of general neglect. The buildings were large but low rise, three or four stories high with multi-occupancy. Some had lock-up shop frontages for small merchants and artisans. Nowadays such building would be classified as tenements. Some of them were interconnected by a maze of passages. The large, heavy, wooden front gates of these buildings which were locked at night by the caretaker using outsize keys, opened up into courtyards which gave access to the individual dwellings. They were for the most part badly lit, damp, not very large and quite often bug infested. Rooms communicated without corridors so that some inner rooms often had no windows to admit daylight nor could they be ventilated. Rooms that were used as living areas during daytime doubled up as multi-occupied sleeping quarters at night and within them, multi-occupied beds for the many children most families produced. Not surprisingly, bed bugs were no strangers under such conditions.

It was an area of poverty. It was a neighbourhood of deprivation. It was a community of hand-to-mouth existence. But the deprivation was only material; spiritually the people felt privileged. On festivals and especially on the Sabbath day they felt like kings and queens. By Friday night, the Sabbath eve, they had cleaned the house, cooked the Sabbath meal, baked the *chala*⁴, bathed and changed into their Sabbath best. The week’s worries were forgotten. They went to the synagogue and joyfully praised God for having been born Jews and thanked him for his munificence. It was the background on which ghetto stories in literature are based.

It was the district of the Jewish proletariat. Despite parental strictures which instructed the young to be concerned with the spiritual and not with the material life, patiently to wait for the coming of the Messiah who would put things to rights, many of its sons took their destiny into their own hands, worked actively inside the Communist, Socialist and Trade Union movements,

¹ Jews' Street

² German: Factory owners.

³ German: Wholesalers.

⁴ Plaited white bread slightly sweetened specially baked for the Sabbath.

later fought in Spain, some never to return. It was their attempt at fighting for equality. They considered messianism as “jam tomorrow” and religion as the opiate of the underprivileged.

Most of the Jewish “upper class”, if they practised the religion at all, belonged to the less strict neologue community. The lay management of the orthodox community provided for its members from the cradle to the grave, in sickness and in health, in prosperity and in poverty. There were the rabbis who welcomed the male children into the community by circumcision, those who adjudicated on *kashrut*¹, those who arbitrated on matrimonial matters, those who taught the Torah, and when one had breathed one’s last, there were rabbis who belonged to the *Chevra Kaddishah*², who would lay the body to rest.

The social structure of the Jewish community was well developed and catered not only for its spiritual but also for its educational, material and health needs. Apart from the two large synagogues it had many *Schtiebl*³. The *Talmud Torah*⁴ had been established for some centuries: about one hundred years earlier a secular elementary school for Jewish children as well as a small hospital were established. In my childhood there were three Jewish schools for elementary education, one for boys, one for girls and one co-educational. There was also a Jewish secondary school under the headship of one, Sebestyén (of whom later) which I later joined. A modern soup kitchen for the poor was established. A brand new Jewish Hospital which had the then very latest facilities was built. The name of one of its main surgeons sticks in my mind: it will recur in the relating of my story. His title was Primarius rather than just simply doctor: God help him who would have dared to address him other than as “Herr Primarius Oestreicher”. The foundation stone for the hospital was laid in 1928 by President Masaryk in the presence of the Minister of Health⁵. The hospital and the soup kitchen were financed⁶ and staffed entirely by the Jewish Community.

By and large it was an observant religious community. This was reflected in the many prayer rooms and religious houses of study in the town. The main religious centres were the two large synagogues. The one serving the orthodox community which was referred to as “der grosse Shul”⁷, was on the Schlosstrasse, the road leading up to the castle. The other, used by the neologue congregation, was situated at the bottom end of the Judengasse, a street that led towards the Danube embankment. Looking at this synagogue with its two turrets from this aspect, one is able to see the tall steeple of the catholic cathedral towering over the synagogue as if to remind the Jews of who was master in the house .

The community, like most Jewish communities, had an easy relationship with God. They hardly complained of the many hardships they had to endure but

¹ Hebrew: Ritually clean food.

² Hebrew: The Holy Society. (A burial society)

³ Pronounce shteebl. A small prayer and study room. From the Yiddish meaning "little room".

⁴ School for religious instructions of children.

⁵ Father Dr. Josef Tiso, later to become president of the fascist Slovak State and an inveterate anti-Semite.

⁶ There was some financial assistance for the building of the hospital from the American Joint Distribution Committee.

⁷ German: The Great synagogue.

accepted them as the will of God. They made light of their constant struggle for existence by making a joke of it. It was, as we used to say “*kitzel dich allein und lach allein*”¹ “How just is Gottenu”² they would say, “the rich He gives food - and the poor He gives appetites” or “Our rabbi is so poor that if he didn’t fast every Monday and Thursday³, he would starve to death”. At times, in desperation, the observations were more sacrilegious yet respectful: “Hashem⁴ is deaf to our pleadings. He has become hard of hearing with age”.

As a residue from the past, street name plaques were in three languages. The population was polyglot or at least most people spoke or partly understood two or more of the local languages. This, added to liturgical and modern Hebrew of which most Jews had some knowledge, made for quite an array of linguistic skills. The older generation of Jews spoke mostly German and Hungarian. The more recent Jewish immigrants who came mostly from the eastern province of Ruthenia⁵ were referred to, rather deprecatingly, as “*Unterländer*”⁶. This implied shrewdness, cunning and deviousness. They spoke Yiddish. The old established community looked rather askance at this. To the linguistically assimilated resident Jews the use of Yiddish was not welcome. It highlighted their own recent origins. Nevertheless, they peppered their German and Hungarian liberally with Yiddish words and expressions especially when they wanted to be secretive in the presence of non-Jews. If now no longer, Yiddish was a living language before the holocaust. It was the first language of several million people. There exists a large native Yiddish literature. In recent years a Yiddish writer⁷ won the Nobel Prize for literature. Yiddish is a living language in the sense that it adapts to local circumstances and quite shamelessly enriches itself by adopting many words from host countries by “yiddifying” them. Yiddish is considered by some to be a roguish language but is, in fact a language with a well defined structure and grammar: it is an expressive and emotive language, it is a language with vitality. A hand or head movement is often used when words are inadequate. Yiddish is thus a body language as well as a verbal one. There is the anecdote which demonstrates the importance of hands in the Yiddish Language. Two Yiddish speakers meet in the depth of winter, hands in pockets. They stop but neither speaks. After a while one of them says: “Nu, why don’t you say something?” Replies the other: “it is too cold to talk”.

¹ German: Tickle yourself and laugh by yourself.

² A composite of a German noun (Gott) and a Hebrew suffix (enu) with translate as “our Lord”. Jews are forbidden to take the name of God in vain (Exodus 20:7) and will paraphrase it in many different ways.

³ Very religious Jews fast on those two days.

⁴ Hebrew: The Name. Another paraphrase for God’s name.

⁵ Subcarpatian Russia.

⁶ German: A person coming from the low country.

⁷ Isaac Bashevis Singer.

My Family.

I am the fourth in a family of five children. My parents' second child, Isidor (Natzi), arrived only 16 months after the first, Aurel (Avri). Thereafter my parents appear to have planned an interval of three years between their other children. Next came Erwin then I and finally my sister Renata (Renka). There was therefore a difference of 10 years between the oldest and the youngest. By the time that I arrived it must have been a question of *déjà vu*. Mamma, as we called our mother, is reported to have said with not a little disappointment "another boy". When at last my sister arrived, my parents must have felt the family complete and for Mamma, who was an ambitious woman, enough was enough.

I feel a little diffident using the term "ambitious". In the British context "to be ambitious" is not an endearing trait to possess, not a characteristic that the British would hesitate to admit to. It is something that foreigners are: it implies pushiness and not being altogether nice. Jews and people from the continental Europe think of ambition as a desirable attribute. It has positive attributes and none of the negative overtones of its cognate English word. Ambition implies drive, determination and being aspiring.

If Mamma was ambitious, Papa was the opposite. He was unassuming, calm and not easily roused or disturbed; in the modern idiom, he was laid back. I cannot be sure but I would not be surprised if Mamma had thought Papa weak and ineffectual. Where Mamma would shout, Papa would listen; it would have been very difficult to rouse him to anger. I cannot remember a single occasion when he either spanked me or shouted at any of his offsprings. Perhaps Papa was more than a little fatalistic. Mamma related the incidence when Avri as a baby was taken seriously ill. She ran from pillar to post seeking help. Papa, so Mamma related, just said: "the Lord has given, the Lord can take: blessed be the name of the Lord." I can highlight the different attitudes of my parents with two personal recollections. I remember running around in the playground and falling. I run to my mother with a grazed knee, crying. "It is God's punishment for running", I was admonished. On another occasion when I was older I went ice skating and fractured my wrist. My father calmly put the wrist in a splint and took me to hospital. There was neither reprimand nor reproach.

Mamma was a determined woman. Before the First World War she lived in Vienna where she was married at a young age. Her husband turned out to be a lay-about and an inveterate, unreformed gambler. Mamma could not earn enough to settle his gambling losses. She had the courage to divorce this man. It must have needed a great deal of guts and determination for a woman to take such a step at the turn of the 20th century.

Mamma was an intense and an ambitious personality. In many ways she was way ahead of her time. She was an early type of a career woman who had not yet worked out how to apportion her time between her career and her family. She was very hard working, striving to do well for her family. She was up with the lark and did not retire until late at night. There is the memory of her constant

activity and I am unable to recall a single instance when she relaxed. Mamma was, what is now termed, a workaholic.

My mother was the matriarch, she ruled the roost. She was hard. She was ambitious for her children - she had dreams for them. She gave of herself to the limit and expected the limit of her children. I remember when Avri and Natzi started work Mamma expected an unopened pay packet on pay day. Mamma decided what pocket money they were allowed. On one occasion Natzi asked for some more money. Mamma returned the whole pay packet to him and told him that he may as well keep it all himself and leave home. Natzi broke down but Mamma would not withdraw the threat until he apologised. I have little doubt that her attitudes taught all her children to be dependable and to have a sense of responsibility.

It is interesting to relate how each brother remembers our mother. It is fascinating to compare subjective recollections. I spoke to Avri about our parents after Papa's funeral; Avri recalled Mamma as extraordinarily diligent and industrious. Natzi remembers her as a very wise woman. Erwin had a very special relationship with her. During the war when deportations were at their height it was Erwin's job in an architectural office of some ministry which gave him protection from deportation. This protection extended to the parents and through them, to minor children of the household. He became not only the main breadwinner but also the "protector" of the family. Mamma and Erwin talked into the early hours while he was at the drawing board. His memories must be quite special which none of us shared. On reflection it was quite a Freudian situation; Papa's authority as paterfamilias became somewhat marginalised.

There are many memories of my mother that I carry: her suffering from rheumatism and bunions, her hyperactivity which was rarely limited by the pain she must have suffered especially in the winter months. I seemed always to be looking for her approbation. I remember a specific instance of being sent to collect some goods from the wholesalers. I was told how much it would be and was given the money to pay. The wholesaler undercharged for the goods but I did not let on. On returning to our shop I told my mother that I had haggled and managed to knock down the price. I recall the smile of approval on Mamma's face to this day. Sometime later she heard from the wholesalers about their mistake and I withdrew shamefacedly. With hindsight, an obvious cry for recognition.

My father was quite different. He was trained for clerical work and he was a good administrator. He loved paper work: he used different coloured pens to highlight items. During the Italian invasion of Abyssinia he placed a map of the battle area into the shop window and with coloured pins showed the positions of the two armies. He was quite a handyman. I think that he would have been happier as a good carpenter or cobbler. But, for a family with middle class aspirations that would not have been acceptable.

I have very pleasant memories of Papa from my childhood. I recall a drop-leaf desk that he built for my birthday. Papa was a bit of a hoarder - I recall the complete collection of illustrated magazines, bound in volumes, covering the

whole of the First World War; I spent many hours looking through it. I remember Papa starting me off on a scrap book. We cut out pictures and cartoons of national and international politicians that appeared in newspapers and glued them into a large book that had contained samples of fabrics. By the age of 8 or 9, I knew the names of all the prime ministers and foreign secretaries of nearly all the countries and through it I knew all the Capitals and learnt of the foreign policy issues of the day. It was my introduction to politics. I recollect the walks we had. Aged about 11 years I caught a chill which developed into a chest infection. In the days before antibiotics this was a very serious matter. I was off school for well over two months. When I had improved sufficiently the doctor suggested that I needed plenty of fresh air. It was now summer time. For many weeks Papa woke me at 5 a.m. The rest of the household were still fast asleep. The sun had risen. We breakfasted on buttered bread rolls and fresh coffee and off we went. We walked into the foothills of the Small Carpathians which were quite nearby. As I now recall this memory I still have the sensation of the clarity of the atmosphere, the freshness of the hedges around the villas, the smell of lilac, the song of birds and the stillness of the air. The air was anodyne. I remember the talks we had on these walks; nothing very deep or philosophical we just talked about this and that. I felt happy, contented and at peace. I can easily reminisce about an overnight journey in a steam train from Bratislava to the Tatra mountains. How wonderfully excited I was at this adventure. Of course, I went to sleep with my head in my father's lap and when I woke the sun had risen and I saw the beautiful views of glorious snow covered mountains for the first time. I recall changing to an electric train that took us to Tatranská Lomnica and I remember the fiacre journey from the station to the sanatorium. My father stayed a day or two. We walked in the park with avenues of tall trees in which red squirrels lived. I remember feeding them with peanuts; oh, how timid they were. As a town child this was really the first time that I saw natural beauty and little animals in the wild.

The concept that by educating girls one educated the next generation was not, in Mamma's childhood, current. It was a question not so much of teaching them the three Rs¹ but of making them aware of the three Ks². Mamma's schooling was "complete" at the age of eleven. It is not surprising, therefore, that my parents could not give me intellectual stimulation and satisfaction. It was Avri who, in this respect, was in loco parentis. Of my brothers it was he with whom I had some communion as a child. He was the oldest of the brothers and I the youngest but far from ignoring me he took an interest in me. He was my friend, guide and philosopher. I looked up to him, he could do no wrong. He introduced me to playing chess when I was seven, to Esperanto when I was about eleven. When he took an interest in medieval Jewish history he spoke to me about the Greats of that era, Maimonides, Abarbanel, Yehuda ha Levi and many more. He spoke to me of their scholarship and poetry.

I had little contact with Natzi as a child. Our relationship developed only after the war. My relationship with Erwin who is exactly three years my senior, was at times quite fraught. I tried to keep up with him but often felt rebuffed. I

¹ Reading, writing and 'rithmetics.

² German: Kirche, Küche und Kinder. Kirk, Kitchen and Kids.

think that this is mostly due to the closeness in our ages. He was too old to play with and too young to influence me. There was, of course, sibling rivalry, on my part at least. During the war Mamma consulted him about things affecting me. I quite resented this. Erwin rather than Papa became the figure of authority and I quite often felt indignant about this. Rightly or wrongly, I feel that this closeness to Mamma gave Erwin an immense amount of self confidence which I always lacked.

I find it more difficult to write about Renka than about my brothers; this is perhaps because she perished in the holocaust. At least I find it more painful. She was only fourteen when she was gassed and incinerated and I hope that she experienced a little happiness in her very short life. I often wonder what she would have grown into, what her children and grandchildren would have looked like. THEY are not here to read these lines! They were never conceived! My heart aches for her lost generations. She and I belonged to the same generation. We played together and, now on reflection, I realise that I tried to be to her what Avri was to me; I hope that I had some success. Renka was not a scholarly person but I remember an occasion when she listened to my reading of a lengthy poem I had written. I had taken for my subject our persecution by the Germans and had given the poem the pretentious title: *Quousque tandem, Domine*.¹ I still remember its opening line: “*Noch ist es ganz ruhig, man hört kein Geräusch*”.² Some of the rhymes are still clear in my memory: “*Horden/ermorden*” and “*.....deutschen Barbaren - sie waren viel ärger als die frühen Tataren*”³. I compare the Germans to the barbarism of the invading hordes of the Tartars. Renka was then only eleven or twelve years old but she must have been quite perceptive; her comment still rings in my ears: “why do you always write sad poetry?” She was right of course, I had not realised it; my poems reflected my state of mind and writing sad, soulful poetry suited my mood; my poems were full of black foreboding. She was the little sister and I felt very protective towards her. Before the war Renka had scarlatina and was admitted to an isolation hospital which was run by nuns. I remember visiting with my parents; we were not allowed into the hospital but could see her only from the courtyard. I can still see her vividly in my mind’s eye perching on the sill looking down at us from nearly a floor above, her face framed by a stone window with metal bars across. She was quite cheerful. She was excited to see us and told us that the nuns had taught her a prayer which she then recited: “Hail Mary full of grace...”. I do not know what my parents thought but I remember fearing that she would return home a Christian. As Renka started to grow into a young woman our relationship began to change but we remained very close to each other to the last.

The third adult in the family was maiden aunt Hermina. We called her Tante⁴. She was one of Mamma’s older sisters. She was a simple soul and I remember her for many different reasons some rather silly and trivial but all pleasant. I have a clear recollection that she could not wear her dentures but always carried them in her handbag. I recall when I was about six or seven years old I saw a little pedal car in a shop window and often asked for it as a present. I

¹ Latin: How much longer, O Lord.

² German: It's yet still, nothing stirs.

³ German: Hordes/murdering....German barbarians worse than the Tartars.

⁴ German: Aunt

still remember clearly that it cost 130 crowns about £1 (\$4) by mid 1930 standard. I think I would have been the happiest kid in the building had I been given it. Tante Hermina decided to buy it for my birthday. On the way to the toy shop we had to pass my parents shop and we called to say hello. When Mamma heard what we were about, she strictly forbade Tante Hermina to spend her money on the toy. I was heartbroken and to this day I remember sobbing my heart out.

Tante Hermina was not really a maiden aunt but wanted to be known as that. She came to live with my parents when Avri was born but later moved away when she married an old gentleman who soon after died. Aunt Hermina returned to live with my parents. Avri was Hermina's favourite. She always treated him to his favourite nosh - cocoa powder and sugar mixed in a cup. She would rarely treat the other children likewise. Natzi tells me that there was a great deal of sibling rivalry between him and Avri.

Tante Hermina and Erwin were often at loggerheads. Erwin was really Mamma's favourite. He was the best scholar in the family, the most studious. It was he who brought home the best school reports. The reports were graded: "1" excellent to "5" fail. Mamma was very keen on reports. The first item on the list of subject was "Conduct". She seemed to have been more concerned with a "1" in conduct than a "4" in some important subject. I recently found some of my primary school reports and I had not a few "4". One report has a dot placed on top of the "1" for "Conduct". I remember that I hoped that Mamma would not notice the dot - but she did! The uproar in the house still reverberates in my ears.

My mother was born in Jablonica¹ a village near the Moravian border and north of Bratislava. Recent research into our family roots established that her mother came from Trstín and her father was born in Cerová²: all three villages are enclosed within a 5 miles radius. Assuming the lack of mobility in the early 19th Century, it must be assumed that my maternal ancestors were well established in that neck of the woods for several generations. Delving further into the family origins becomes speculative. However, in the 13th Century, at the invitation of King Casimir of the Poles, Jews settled in Poland having arrived there from France and the Rhineland where they had lived from the 9th Century onward. There is documented historical evidence that, in the mid 17th Century, in the wake of widespread massacres of Jews by Chmielnicki and his Cossack hordes, there occurred a mass exodus of Jews from Poland to neighbouring Bohemia and Moravia.

My father and his family came from Ploiesti, north of Bucharest, in Rumania. Their migration is harder to establish. His father was born in Iași. The family could have moved south from the Ukraine or come north from Turkey, our ancestors having settled there after the expulsion from Spain in 1492. According to my father, his grandfather held a Turkish passport.

There is, sometimes, in the life of a person, a moment when a small seemingly insignificant action, unwittingly, becomes a watershed, a defining moment in

¹ Pronounce as Yablonitsa.

² Pronounce as Tserova.

that person's life. This was so with Papa. He told me of the time during the First World War when he was a private in the Romanian army. He went for a walk in the woods near the military encampment and came across an Hungarian scouting patrol. He put his hands up in the air and was taken prisoner by them. It was quite un-heroic. He was interned in a prisoner of war camp near Pozsony¹. Because he was able to speak German he was allocated for work in a large department store where he met my mother. His short walk finishing as it did many hundred kilometres away defined his future and produced me and my descendants.

I never knew my grandparents. I regret this to this day. Mamma's parents died before the First World War; Papa's father died three months after my birth and although my paternal grandmother lived into her nineties, she resided in, what was then considered, a far away country. For the same reason I did not meet any of Papa's siblings until some of them emigrated from Rumania and settled in Israel.

On my mother's side, knowing family, should have been easier but apart from Hermina who lived with us, I only knew an aunt Bertha who lived in Bratislava. She was married to a work-shy husband, had five children, and was very poor. They lived on a social housing estate on the other side of town; there was only the occasional contact between the two families. I remember Bertha and her family only vaguely. They all perished in some German hell. Bertha helped out with the cooking in rich households and as part payment was given a midday meal. There is the sad story (it was told as a joke) that she once wrapped some *Mohnnudel*², the remnant of her meal, in some paper to take home for the family.

There was also my mother's youngest brother, Armin, who was the village baker in Plavecky Svätý Mikuláš³, a small village where he and his family were the only Jews. He too, had five children. Armin, his wife and three of their children converted to Catholicism. They became dedicated Catholics more devout than ever they were Jews. Sometime after his conversion Armin arrived in Bratislava and came to visit my mother. When she answered the door she is supposed to have said "and what do you want, peasant?" and slammed the door in his face. A word of explanation. Mamma had three brothers. One died for the Austrian Kaiser in World War I on a battlefield in Italy. The second emigrated to the USA but returned from there to die of some dreaded disease. Therefore, from my mother's point of view Armin was the only remaining male offspring who carried her family name. In the Jewish religion it is the son who says the *Kaddish*⁴. With his baptism her parents had lost the only person who could pray for their peaceful repose. Armin and his family took baptism before March 1939, the date of Slovak "independence". This exempted them from deportation and they survived the war. One daughter and one son insisted on remaining Jews and they both perished. There is a lovely true story about this cousin. At the time of the story radios were very large and still very rare. The country "yokel" came to town and was asked

¹ Hungarian for Bratislava

² German: A dish of pasta noodles sprinkled with ground poppy seeds and sugar.

³ Pronounce as Plahvetskee Svetee Mekoolash

⁴ A memorial prayer for the dead.

whether they had a radio at home. He is reported to have answered that he would buy a radio when it was small enough to be carried in his pocket. He was ridiculed but, obviously, it was he who had the vision. I did not meet Armin and his family until after the war. I visited Plavecký Svätý Mikuláš. The village was still very primitive. Electricity had only just been introduced and paraffin was used for lighting. The toilet in Armin's house was at the bottom of the garden. There were no drains. Too primitive even for a chemical toilet, it was just a latrine with a wooden board and a hole in it.

Neighbours and Neighbourhood.

The tour starts at Schlosstrasse number 60. It is where I started my pilgrimage. It is the building where I first saw the light of day and where I uttered my first cry in protest at being expelled from the safety of my mother's womb.

Number 60, a large stucco faced stone building on two levels was about half way up the Schlosstrasse. Its rendering weather worn and falling away in parts. The building was of indeterminate age and must have seen better days. We lived there until 1937. Sometime in the mid-1930, a stone archway was constructed nearly opposite our building, at the entrance to a side street that lead from the Schlosstrasse. In a recess within the archway a Madonna and child were placed. Beyond this point the Schlosstrasse takes a sharp turn to the left and the road leads up to the castle at a steady gradient and it changes its character. The top end of the road being occupied mostly by gentiles, though some Jews may have lived there, its lower end was largely occupied by Jews. The archway seemed to me like a border post and for a child brought up in the narrow, self imposed, confines of a "ghetto", it seemed that walking beyond this point was like walking into the unknown and I cannot remember walking up towards the castle along our road more than once or twice. It would have been done with some apprehension. But this could be a feeling all children have when they first stray from their immediate familiar environment. It reflects a fear of the unknown and need not be connected with the community divide which I had to cross.

At the corner of the building was the entrance to the *krčma*¹ belonging to the Rosenblum family. It was their only income and it gave them a precarious living. The hostelry offered some food and alcoholic beverages for the working people of the neighbourhood. Customers sat on benches along long tables. Herr Rosenblum served behind the bar on which were displayed some of the food that his wife prepared. Under a small glass dome they kept the quark² which reeked of sweaty socks; I have the stench in my nostrils still. There was many a time when we watched people coming out drunk, groggy and staggering, and heard their tuneless singing.

A few steps down the road from the *krčma*, a large doorway gave access to the building. It took us into a wide, stone floored foyer, roofed over by the apartment above it. The foyer was dim, dusky and dismal, the light coming through the front gateway at one end and from a flagged, square courtyard, open to the sky, at the other. There was a step along the full width of the foyer. We, children often sat on that step playing a game which required much skill in casting and catching. The game was played with discarded horse shoe studs. We sat for hours on this step polishing the studs. We moistened them with spittle and rubbed them against the stone until we wore them down and they were quite thin and light. We felt well rewarded for the many hours of hard work because the lighter the stud the easier it was to control.

¹ Slovak: Public drinking place

² German: A soft curd cheese.

Apartments at street level were entered from this courtyard. When we were small we acted out most games in this courtyard. Across it there was an unlocked urinal that was used by the clients of the *krčma*. In the summer when the drunkards left the door ajar, the acrid smell of decomposing vomit and urine was sickening. A stone staircase led to the next level. On reaching the top of the flight of stairs, before reaching the landing with its wrought iron balustrades that allowed access to the apartments, one faced the front door of the Jewish family Haberfeld, who had two daughters and a son. The son could draw well and managed to produce a sketch of his father in seconds. Not all tenants were Jews, in fact a variety of different people lived in the building.

We lived on the ground floor on one side of the foyer. The windows of our apartment which faced the road were about ten feet above pavement level and were not very large. On the opposite side lived the Rosenblums. We shared the outside WC with them. Their apartment was accessible through an inside door of the *krčma* which led into the four roomed apartment. Nathan and his wife Malka (Rosenblum *bacsi*¹ and *neni*², as we called them) managed to bring thirteen children into the world of whom ten had survived until the holocaust. The children of the families being roughly of similar ages played together and grew up together. There was Avri and Schatzi, Erwin and Duja, I and Oszi and, Renka and Hencsi.

The Rosenblums and the Salamons lived together in great harmony and much respect for each other. At Purim³ time we exchanged gifts, sending *shlachmones*⁴. The Salamon family sent a whole jellied carp to the Rosenblum family which Mamma had prepared, and they in turn sent a chocolate gâteau that Frau Rosenblum had baked. I always found the chocolate gâteau very welcome because Mamma only baked kuchen and strudel but never a chocolate gâteau. Mr. Rosenblum was very scholarly and had great Jewish learning. If ever we wanted to know something we often asked him. His wife called him the walking encyclopaedia.

A few yards from number 60 was the main orthodox synagogue of the town. Further down, the Schlosstrasse met the Kaputzinergasse where my parents had a shop, and the Judengasse which was part of the ghetto, the three roads forming a tri-stellate. At the focal point of the junction of the three roads there was an apartment block known as the Edelhof.

On 1st September 1939, Erev Shabbat⁵, the day Hitler's Wehrmacht marched into Poland and his shrill, barking voice could be heard blaring out from radios through open windows, there occurred a fatal accident in one of the apartments of the Edelhof. A young Jewish man, I believe that his name was Berger, whose job it was to disinfect and fumigate an apartment using a cyanide compound, entered the apartment unprotected and died. On reflection, what a dreadfully poignant pointer to the future on this very day.

¹ Hungarian: "uncle". A title children give older people who are not related.

² Hungarian: "aunt". Female version of *bacsi*.

³ Holiday commemorating the story of Esther. A festive carnival time.

⁴ Yiddish from the Hebrew *Mishlo'ach Manot*, the sending of gifts.

⁵ Hebrew: The eve of the Sabbath i.e. Friday.

A Very Early Childhood Memory.

Many memories have no date but on reflection a date for them can often be reconstructed. It is also difficult to judge which are real childhood memories and which memories of adults relating events. In the final analysis it doesn't really matter which.

One of my early memories recollects my father boarding up the windows facing the road. I see in my mind's eye a very deep window sill, wide enough for a small child to sit on. I recall sleeping below this window in my parents' bedroom in, what seemed to small child, a large cot. I do not know what age I was. I must have been quite young. The cot was later handed down to my younger sister, so I reason that I could have been no more than three or four years old.

Discriminatory laws in some neighbouring countries operated a *numerus clausus* which permitted only a limited number of Jews to register at university. Czechoslovakia had no such restrictions and some of those excluded in their own countries, paid for their course of studies at Czechoslovak institutes. Mobs are fickle and can be manipulated and swayed one way at one moment and equally an opposite way the next. In 1931, Slovak and German students at the university of Bratislava barred access to lectures to all Jewish students who were foreign nationals and demonstrations on the campus spilled over into the streets. It appears that during the previous night whilst I was asleep a mob had marched down the Schlosstrasse indiscriminately throwing stones through the windows of Jewish apartments. One large stone smashed our window pane and lodged itself at the edge of the deep window sill. Had it been thrown with slightly more force it would have fallen off the sill, straight onto my head below. My first brush with death. I was too young to understand the reason for this mob violence except that it happened because we were Jews.

Some years later mob violence broke out again. This time because a film with some Jewish content was being screened. The film to be shown portrayed the story of the Golem. The story of the Golem goes back to medieval Prague. There still exists in old Prague the "Altneuschul" a very old synagogue with a clock face of Hebrew letters and the time being shown in an anti clockwise direction. The rabbi who served this synagogue in the 16th century was one called, Loeb. He was a cabbalist and practised mysticism. It is related that this Rabbi Loeb built a figure of a man in clay. He placed in its mouth a paper on which the most holy name of God was written. This action put life into the clay figure which then obeyed the commands of its creator. Rabbi Loeb named it the Golem. Perhaps a forerunner of the Frankenstein monster. In modern terms he created a robot. In passing, it is an interesting thought that Karel Čapek, the writer who originally coined the word robot, lived in Prague and must have known the story of the Golem. I still do not understand why this film should have produced such a violent reaction from the mob. Was it just incitement by demagogues? Is there ever a rational reason for mob violence?

Religion.

It is related that the great Rabbi Hillel who was born 30 BC was goaded by a pagan to explain Judaism whilst the unbeliever stood on one foot. The Rabbi responded by saying “do not do to others that which you would not have them do to you - this is the essence of Judaism, the rest is commentary”. There are in Judaism two sorts of transgressions: those against God and those against Man. This principle originates from the Ten Commandments. The first three commandments deal with Man’s relationship to God and the forth with the observance of the Sabbath. The remaining commandments deal with Man’s relationship with Man. God forgives a sin committed against God when one sincerely repents of it. Transgressions against one’s fellow, God only forgives after due restitution to the injured party has been made.

Jews have an easy relationship with God. They have no need for an interlocutor. God is ever present. I have a little personal story to tell about this. I must have been a toddler not more than 4 or 5 years old. In our apartment we had a large walk-in larder. The shelves inside it were laden down with all sorts of home made preserves, jams, cakes, kuchen and of course tins of cookies and biscuits. I must have asked for a biscuit and been told that I could not then have one. When the room was empty, I walked to the larder, opened the door stepped into it and whilst reaching for a biscuit I tightly closed my eyes. At that moment someone entered the room. When asked why I was in the larder with my eyes shut, I replied that when my eyes were closed it was dark and since I could not see nor could God see me taking a biscuit. I was told that God can see me at all times.

Jews argue and haggle with God - like the biblical Abraham who tried to persuade God not to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorra. From childhood one hears private agreements and contracts being made with God: If I do this then will you do that. When I was about 13 years old I was very keen on the adventure stories of Karl May who wrote innumerable volumes. I decided to write one such story myself. The writing did not go too well; I contracted to say all the required prayers every day if God would give me the inspiration to write. I believed that I had made a valid contract and I found that whilst I kept my part of the bargain, I managed to write well. I now recognise this as no more than self-induced confidence but then I believed in the deal.

Thus, in my early years, religion played quite a large part. It was the religion of the home, religion by example rather than the religion of the synagogue. I learnt to read and pray in Hebrew. But of course prayers were just so many words in a language which sounded familiar but which I did not understand. However, at a very young age I was taught certain principles of faith: to love the Lord God with all my heart, with all my soul and with all my might; to believe in the coming of the Messiah however long he may tarry; to say and understand the affirmation of the creed - “*shma yisrael.*”¹. With this sentence

¹ Hebrew: Hear ye oh Israel the Lord our God is One. The fundamental and only doctrine of the Jewish religion.

on their lips, I was told, Jewish martyrs went to the stake to be burned; every pious Jew would wish to die with this affirmation on the lips.

I cannot remember that I prayed with any great devotion. I recall seeing people at prayer in what seemed an ecstatic state. Wrapped in a prayer shawl, eyes closed, beating their breast, moving head and thorax up and down, up and down, rotating shoulders this way and that, rhythmically, incessantly, endlessly, muttering the litany and the occasional “omen”¹. The more robustly performed, the greater the impression of devotion. I thought that all this bowing and swaying and shaking was necessary to achieve complete concentration, detachment from the material world; a portal into the world of spiritual completeness. At least so I was told. I suppose it must be an experience similar to self hypnosis, to become oblivious of one’s surroundings. As a child I was so intent to emulate the adults that I could never detach myself from the physical action. That may be the reason why I could never pray with any enthusiasm and reverence. Now, on reflection, some of the contortionists could have performed more for effect and appearance than from deep devotion and piety. They wore their religiosity for public display and admiration. I remember on one particular occasion during the *shmone-esray*² seeing Herr K., a businessman admired for his piety, take a pencil from behind his ear and write a note on the back of his hand. There could not have been much silent devotion in that man’s heart and mind. There were many other instances of sham. I was full of confusion. I saw the conflict between words and action. Although not yet fully aware of it at the time, I saw the lip service and formalism of some religious people as far removed from the ethical concepts taught me. It was often no more than letter fanaticism. Like, amongst the Pharisees of old, the letter of the law mattered more to them than its spirit.

I learnt some Jewish history through religious observance; the story of Esther at Purim, the story of the exodus at Pesach³ and the story of the Maccabees at Chanukah. The rest of biblical history was taught me at school. We started with the book of Genesis in the first class at primary school. By the time I left we had finished the last chapter of the Jewish Bible⁴.

Of course, I had heard about Jesus, the crucifixion and of the accusation that the Jews were responsible for his death. I was told by Christians that we, Jews, having killed Jesus, have to pay the penalty for all eternity: our only salvation lay in the acceptance of the Christian Gospel.

There were fantasy stories about priests abducting Jewish children and forcibly converting them to Christianity. To a young impressionable child these were frightening tales especially since the image of Renka being cared for by nuns and sitting behind a barred window reciting “Hail Mary full of grace..” was still fresh in my mind. I always went past churches giving them a wide berth when I could and when I could not, I went past them with not a little trepidation. To this day I experience the Pavlovian reaction of a slight

¹ Ashkenazi pronunciation for Amen.

² Hebrew: The prayer of eighteen benedictions which is recited silently and with great devotion.

³ Passover

⁴ The Old Testament, The Pentateuch

unease at the smell of incense when passing a church. These stories about priests were similar to those told by Christians that Jews abducted gentile children so that their blood could be used for the making of Matzo¹. This blood libel caused much suffering to many Jews over the centuries and the libel still persists in some quarters. Quite recently, I heard a middle aged Austrian, interviewed on television, expressing his conviction that “it is fact that there is a sect of Jews who drink Christian blood.” I knew of the persecution of the Jews by Christians: the massacres by the crusaders, Torquemada’s auto-da-fé and the pogroms of the Tsars: I empathised with the victims. I had read Sienkiewicz’s novel “Quo Vadis” in my early teens and learnt from it about the early church. I found the novel “Ben Hur” gripping. I empathised no less with the agony of persecution suffered by the early Christians at the hands of the Romans. My heart went out to the characters.

My Jewish teaching instilled in me that God castigates us for transgressing his commandments. I recalled that I was once told that God had punished me for running. There was I, a little boy, right in the middle of all this divine retribution aimed at me from the God as perceived by both denominations. But I also remembered being taught that I must love God with all my heart, with all my soul and with all my might. This became an uphill struggle; there was the confusion caused by the conflict of different influences. There was the need to cling to a received heritage and there was the guilt of its rejection. There was the conflict of standards. God sees and watches you everywhere all the time and knows all your inner thoughts. But a child observing his elders can detect incongruity in their actions. The Sabbath day being a very holy day, Sabbath observance is very strict. No manner of work must be done by anyone in the household, “not by your servant, nor by the stranger in your midst, nor by your cattle”². All manual acts are considered work. Therefore, one is not permitted to light a candle to see by nor a fire to keep one warm. It is considered just as sinful to ask a servant or a Gentile (stranger) directly to do it for you as to do the task yourself. One went about it in a circuitous manner by saying in front of a Gentile “isn’t it dark” or “it is very cold” hoping that he would then, on his own volition, volunteer to switch on the light or light a fire. In the days prior to automation, Jewish people relied on the “shabbos goy”.³ One can easily visualise a conversation between a Jew and a shabbos goy: “It goes dark very early” says the Jew. “Well, why don’t you turn on the light?” replies the Gentile. “It is our Sabbath and we are not allowed to”. “Shall I do it for you?” asks the willing Gentile. “That is up to you” replies the expectant Jew. Even as a child I saw this type of ploy as moral decrepitude, trying to prove one’s moral rectitude to God, not by practising the spirit of the law but by deceit. They tried to kid their own all seeing God “who knows their thoughts”⁴.

¹ Unleavened bread used at Passover.

² Exodus 23:12

³ A Gentile who will do these tasks for you.

⁴ Isaiah 66:18

Welcoming The Sabbath.

Yom Kippur¹ apart, the Sabbath is the holiest day in the Jewish calendar. To keep the Sabbath holy is the fourth of the Ten Commandments and in order of importance takes precedence over commandments further down the list. Everything is therefore geared to keep this commandment and make the Sabbath a very special day.

As a child I found the Sabbath eve ritual very exciting. I look back on it with great nostalgia. The preparations for the Sabbath or festival meals were always very special. Our apartment on the Schlosstrasse consisted of four rooms. All rooms except my parents' bedroom doubled up for other purposes. The boys room where my three older brothers slept and which I later joined was, during the day, the family room. On the Sabbath or festivals it was used as the dining room. The kitchen had an enormous hearth where all the cooking and baking was done. Normally we ate at the kitchen table which was also used for preparing food.

I used to like to watch Mamma prepare the dough for the two *chala* breads which she very expertly plaited. Using egg yolk we stuck named labels to the dough of the *chalas* and took them to the baker to be baked in their ovens. The kuchen and strudel were baked at home. The chala breads were brought home on Friday afternoon. At the same time we left a pot of *cholent*² with the baker to be collected on Saturday noon to be eaten for the Sabbath meal. It was very rich and quite a delicacy and as no cooking was permitted on the Sabbath, it was the only hot meal of the day.

Friday afternoon was bath time. The children bathed or were bathed in a big tin bath. We dressed in our "Sunday" best. Later the dining table was covered with a white table cloth and a silver seven branched candelabrum was placed on it. All such preparations gave a sense of expectancy and anticipation. It made the day very special. Apart from the feeling of family unity, continuity and contentment, the preparations gave me a sense of belonging to a wider family of people undergoing similar rituals.

In the evening before dusk, Mamma lit the white candles in the candelabrum and said the benedictions. Papa, my brothers and I went to the synagogue down the road, for the Sabbath eve service. The cantor intoned the famous "*L'cha dodi likrat kala*" - "now friend welcome the bride" and later "*bo'i b'shalom ateret balah*" "come ye in peace, crown of your husband"³. The Sabbath is the bride and the House of Israel is her bridegroom: one welcomes the Sabbath with as much anticipated pleasure as one receives one's new bride. And then, after the conclusion of the service we walked home wishing all and sundry "a gut shabbos". One felt at peace with the world and God was in his Heaven.

¹ Day of Atonement.

² Cholent is a dish of beans, barley and smoked brisket similar to chili con carne but not spiced.

³ An introductory melodic prayer on the Sabbath eve intoned by the cantor.

At home, the table was set. We washed our hands and recited the required benediction. Papa sat at the top of the table and we all took our places. Following the tradition of a thousand generations or more, Papa rose, poured some wine into a silver goblet and recited in Hebrew "*It was evening; it was morning, the sixth day. Heaven and Earth and all His works were completed.... and the Lord rested on the seventh day and made it holy*"¹. He then said the benediction over wine, sipped from the cup and passed it along. Papa then took some chala and reciting the benediction over bread, broke some into eight portions, sprinkled a little salt over each as he passed it to the family. Grace having been said, the meal followed.

The first course was usually chicken noodle soup. The noodles were home made. Once in Italy I saw fresh pasta being prepared and left to dry on a table. This reminded me of my childhood. The chicken or goose was bought live and taken to the slaughter house. The bird was plucked and dressed at home and the feathers saved for the bottom drawer. It was Tante Hermina's job to prepare the all important chicken soup, cook the chicken and vegetables. For the second course the jellied carp was served. Mamma was the fish and pastry cook. The carp for the festive meal was picked live from a tank in the fish shop, brought home wrapped in wet newspapers, prepared and cooked all within a few hours. The fish stock was poured over the cooked fish and left to set into a jelly. I think I enjoyed the jelly more than the fish. The fish was eaten with some of the freshly baked white chala which we had earlier collected from the baker. The third course consisted of the chicken or a goose with vegetables and potatoes. Finally, this was followed by compote. The compote was, of course, home made and stored in the large walk-in larder. There was never any shortage: stores were always replenished in the summer with all sorts of home made goodies, compotes, jams, bottled vegetables, tomatoes, soured cucumbers and much more.

Meals were always lively occasions. We talked of this and that, mostly of everyday affairs. World politics were discussed but always in the sense "is this good for the Jews". And finally came "*Rabotai n'varech.... achalnu v'savanu - Gentlemen, let us give thanks.... we have eaten and are sated*"².

The orientation of all synagogues is towards Jerusalem. In the western hemisphere this means facing the orient. Inside the easternmost wall of a synagogue is an alcove. Above it, a replica of the "tablets of stone" with the first ten letters of the Hebrew alphabet engraved to represent the ten commandments. Inside the alcove are stored the hand written parchment scrolls of the Law, the Torah. Mystics believe that inside the Ark resides the "*Shehina*"³. The alcove is closed by two doors across which heavy velvet curtains are hung. These are richly embroidered in gold thread. The alcove is approached by ascending a few steps. Not far in front of the Ark is a raised platform with a wooden balustrade along its perimeter and steps leading up to it from two sides. This is the "*Bima*"⁴.

¹ Genesis (1:31-2:3). A commencing prayer on Friday night as part of saying grace.

² Invitation to thanksgiving.

³ Hebrew: The Spirit of God.

⁴ Hebrew: Stage.

The highlight of the Sabbath day service at the synagogue is the reading of the portion from the Torah scrolls. The curtains of the Ark are drawn back with great ceremony and the cantor intones the benedictions. The doors are opened and a scroll is extracted with great reverence. As a child a cold shiver used to run down my spine every time the doors of the Ark were opened - I expected the Spirit of God to come out of the Ark and permeate and envelope us all. The scrolls are dressed in embroidered velvet with silver crowns adorning the wooden handles around which the scroll is wound and by means of which the columns of the writing are advanced. Around the neck of a scroll hangs a silver chain supporting a silver hand in the form of a pointing index finger. This is the "*Yad*"¹. Because the scroll is considered to be too holy to be touched by polluted hands, the *Yad* will be used to indicate the word presently read from the scroll. The scroll is carried towards the Bima with great reverence. As it passes along the aisle, the congregation kiss the fringes of their prayer shawl and touch the velvet cover of the Torah scroll with it. Because of its holiness not even the cover of the scroll is touched with bare hands. The scroll is taken to the Bima and placed on a table where its cover is removed with great piety. It is then unrolled to the place from which the portion of the week is to be read. Members of the congregation are called up to the Bima to be present at the reading of the Law. This is considered a great honour. After the reading of the portion, the commentary is recited. This is usually done by a 13 year old who that week celebrates his Bar Mitzvah.

In the afternoon after a heavy meal of cholent people went for their constitutional and promenaded along the Danube embankment. Most Jewish families could be found there on a Sabbath afternoon. Pleasantries were exchanged and children played hide and seek. There was a general feeling of relaxation and carefree optimism.

¹ Hebrew: Hand.

Zionism.

I was in my middle teens before I became acquainted with post biblical history, mainly by reading the Jewish-Roman historian Josephus Flavius. Beyond that time there appeared to be little written Jewish history until about 700 AD when Islam advanced into the Iberian Peninsula. From that time until Christendom recaptured the peninsula, Jewish literature and science progressed and prospered. Jews chronicle this period of history as the Golden Age. Places like Seville, Cordoba and Granada are writ large in Jewish annals. This epoch ended in 1492. Ferdinand and Isabella, the king and queen who permitted Columbus to sail westward to find a passage to India, gave the Jews of their realm the options of conversion or expulsion from their Kingdoms of Navarre and Castile. Those who took baptism came to be known as “the new Christians” or the “Marranos”¹. To avoid persecution some overtly practised Christianity but secretly adhered to the faith of their fathers. The Holy Inquisition zealously searched for backsliders, converts who practised Jewish rites. The penalty for this apostasy was the auto-da-fé, a public burning of the victim.

I read novels by Yiddish writers who described life in the ghettos of the Pale in Russia. I read how large masses of people eked out a meagre living, spending most of their waking hour in the study of the Torah and its commentaries. I read of their daily fear of the Cossacks and the pogroms. I visualised how, like their ancient ancestors, they recited “*by the rivers of Babylon we sat and we wept when we remembered Zion*”²; I felt the intensity of their exhortation “*if I forget thee oh Jerusalem let my right hand lose its cunning*”³. I understood how they waited the coming of the Messiah on a daily basis. Not surprisingly, they often grasped at straws in the hope that the redeemer had at last arrived. I read books about Reubeni and Sabtai Zwi, two Jews who, in the 16th and 17th centuries, claimed to be the long awaited Messiah. I empathised with the disappointment of the people when they proved to be false. After all, I too was craving for the redeemer to relieve us Jews of the continuing persecutions.

I now ask myself what lessons had I absorbed from learning and reading about the history of my people, ancient and modern. I had realised that the fate of Jewry depended not only on the vagaries of chance as do the fortunes of all nations, but also on the whims of an host environment, a condition with which no other nation had to contend and yet manage to survive. I remembered a quotation from the Bible “*and there arose a new Pharaoh in Egypt who knew not Joseph*”⁴. The inference of the analogy was obvious: place no trust in the goodwill of liberal societies for tomorrow they may change. To quote Schnitzler⁵, an Austrian baptised Jewish playwright, who wrote at the turn of the 20th Century: “*Who created the liberal movement in Austria? The Jews... Who betrayed and deserted the Jews? The liberals. Who created the*

¹ Spanish: Pigs. An insult to Jews who are not permitted to eat pork. Crypto-Jews.

² Psalm 137

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Exodus 1:8

⁵ Arthur Schnitzler, *Gesammelte Werke*, Volume 3, pp. 94-5, Berlin (1913)

national movement in Austria? The Jews. And who deserted them, who spat on them like dogs? ... Exactly the same is bound to happen with Socialism and Communism. Once soup has been served, you'll be chased from the dinner table. It was always like this, and it always will be". What foresight the man had as regards to Communism and the political New Left.

Of course, I realise that I did not then actively verbalise any such conclusions, my reaction was internalised, visceral. On mature reflection, I can only agree with what is generally accepted. Jews having lost their sovereign land, spiritualised their country in the form of the Torah, the Law, and carried this with them out of the Land of Israel into the Diaspora, from country to country, from one expulsion to the next. What made the Torah so central to Jews was that these ancient religious scriptures are not just rules of religious observances, are more than a recorded history of the ancient Israelites but that, above all, they are steeped in social ideals, that they demand social justice and that, with the advent of the Messiah, they hold out the promise of a just society within a redeemed Mankind. It is not, therefore, mere coincidence that the prophets, Jesus, Spinoza, Marx were all Jews because they are the historical proof of the influence of Jewish thinking in search of social justice. So, what binds Jews into a community is a common tradition. Be a Jew religious, secular, agnostic or even an atheist, for so long as he accepts the historical concept of a common Jewish tradition, vestiges of Judaism remain within him. And, when these last vestiges are abandoned it is often the world outside, whether in the extreme form of persecution or the milder form of social ostracism or even by the unguarded comment of a friend, that will remind him of his origins.

In response to the overt and covert forms of anti-Semitism manifested in the 19th Century, as a reaction against the officially inspired and encouraged pogroms in Tsarist Russia, and as a result of the penetration of the western concept of emancipation, modern solutions were sought.

Jews did not have a monolithic view of their condition nor of the solution of how to cure it. There were significant and serious disagreements in the approach to a Jewish solution to a Gentile Problem which perversely was termed "the Jewish Problem", a Gentile shorthand for "what shall we do with and about the Jews". As one such option a stirring of political Jewish national consciousness was emerging. There was, however, a struggle for the Jewish Soul between Nationalism, Orthodoxy and *Haskalah*¹, a struggle that had its roots in the 19th Century. The *risorgimento* movement, the *zeitgeist* of that century, was the midwife to soul searching and to the seeking of solutions to the perplexity of Jews moving between two cultures. There was the opportunity to escape into a wider world, abandoning the intellectually sterile and limiting baggage of the ghetto. Equally, there was the nostalgic sentiment for the warmth of spiritual security that sprung from a confined world that would have to be left behind.

Historically, therefore, Zionism was only one of several possible reactions to the anti-Semitic outpourings, discrimination, harassment and pogroms. In the latter half of the 19th Century several treatise dealing with the problem of anti-

¹ Hebrew: Enlightenment.

Semitism and its solution were published. The short book by Moses Hess¹, *"Rome and Jerusalem"* regarded anti-Semitism as a relic of the reactionary past that would disappear in a progressive socialist society. Pinsker's² book *"Auto-Emancipation"* attributed anti-Semitism to the homelessness of the Jews. They were guests everywhere and at home nowhere. His solution envisaged the acquisition of large tracts of land in which millions of Jews would settle. He did not, at first, have Palestine in mind. Kalischer³, in his *"Drishat Zion"*⁴ maintained, contrary to the accepted orthodox view, that a return to Zion must be brought about by human effort, not by divine miracle or by the advent of the Messiah.

Theodor Herzl⁵, the founder of modern political Zionism was an assimilated Hungarian Jew. Originally, he argued that Jews should convert to Christianity en masse and the "Jewish Problem" would be resolved. This was not a popular idea with Jews. After 1900 years of striving to survive, Jews did not want to write themselves out of history.

As a correspondent for the then famous Viennese "Neue Freie Presse", Herzl was sent to Paris to report on the progress of "L'affaire Dreyfus". Captain Alfred Dreyfus was of the Jewish faith and worked for the French War Ministry. He was accused of spying for Germany. This he strenuously denied protesting his innocence. Dreyfus was tried and found guilty on flimsy and, what later turned out to be, forged evidence. He was publicly cashiered and sentenced to be transported to Devil's Island, a French penal colony of the strictest regime, there to serve life imprisonment. France was split into two camps. Those who believed that the Jew was guilty and those who maintained that the Frenchman was innocent. Amongst the latter was the writer Emile Zola who wrote in the "L'Aurore" the now famous article entitled "J'accuse". In it Zola demonstrates the culpability of the military establishment in finding an innocent man guilty. He was prosecuted for libel but escaped to London. He died under mysterious circumstances a few years later. Amongst those believing Dreyfus innocent were Anatole France and Georges Clemenceau later to become Prime Minister of France. Finally, after many years and because of the constant activity of many Frenchmen, a French Aristocrat, Major Esterhazy, admitted to the offence for which Dreyfus had been condemned, and Esterhazy committed suicide. Dreyfus was retried, found innocent, acquitted and reinstated into the French army.

Following the original trial, Herzl realised that assimilation gave no immunity from the disease of anti-Semitism. He experienced a conversion on the road from Paris, he saw the vision of a Jewish State and he abandoned his previous notions. On his return to Vienna Herzl wrote a thin volume entitled *"Der Judenstaat"*⁶ which had as a subtitle: *"An attempt at a modern solution of the Jewish Question"*. In it, Herzl suggested a constitution for a Jewish country.

¹ Moses Hess, (1812-1875), German Socialist.

² Leon Pinsker, (1821-1891), an Odessa doctor. The book had the subtitle "An exhortation to fellow Jews from a Russian Jew".

³ Zwi Hirsch Kalischer, (1795-1874), Talmudic scholar.

⁴ Hebrew: The seeking of Zion.

⁵ Theodor Herzl, (1860-1904) journalist, Founder of political Zionism.

⁶ German: The Jewish State.

Herzl became politically active and, in 1897, organised the first Zionist Congress in Basle. It was the beginning of active political Zionism. It found fulfilment in the creation of the third Jewish Commonwealth.

In pre-First World War Russia, where the subjugated populace had not enough bread to eat, they were distracted by their masters by being given “circuses” and the Jews were made to “perform”. Pogroms and the murder of Jews was a permanent agenda. As a reaction to this tyranny, Jewish political awakening stirred. There were the inheritors of the “enlightenment” who believed in complete assimilation. Other Jews responded to the “messianic” call of socialism and thought that salvation lay within an egalitarian socialist society. Many of them joined political organizations which were Marxist and they became Mensheviks, Bolsheviks and Trotskyites. Yet others visualised their socialism in the context of Jewish nationalism rather than internationalism and formed themselves into political working class organisations which later, in Israel, evolved into political parties of the left.

Young Jews, while still emotionally accepting the future advent of the Messiah, or at least paying lip service to it, decided that a waiting of two millennia was long enough. If the Messiah tarried much longer, there would be no Jews left to salve. They decided that salvation lay in their own hands. They embraced the *risorgimento* movement and worked on a political level towards the promised in-gathering of the exiles. Zionism can therefore be thought of as Messianism without the Messiah. Thus, in the vanguard of the national renaissance in Russia were two movements: the BILU¹ and the Chovevei Zion². The former movement was concerned with the resettlement of the Holy Land and the other with the renewal of Hebrew as a living language rather than with political activities. Some of the early settlers in Palestine towards the end of last century came from that environment. However, the ideology of reawakened Jewish nationalism, settlement in the Holy Land and the revival of the Hebrew language for profane use was strongly opposed by the orthodox establishment. It preached it to be sacrilege for Jews to aspire to sovereignty before the coming of the Messiah and declared the use of the “holy tongue” for mundane purpose, reprehensible.

Zionism claims that there exists a common past and a common future for the Jewish people. One can accept or reject, in part or as a whole, such a doctrine. More important, Zionism is predicated on the assumption that a successful integration of Jews, as Jews, into a non-Jewish society is impossible. Nowadays, one may or may not agree with this proposition; to most young European Jews of the mid to late 1930 who experienced the rejection by the host community at first hand, it was self evident, real and beyond dispute. In Czechoslovakia this phenomenon became a matter for concern only after the *Anschluss*³. As a consequence, as the few remaining emigration opportunities closed, more people were inclining to the option of Palestine as a possible future homeland. To many it was not their first choice but the Zionist movement gained in membership especially from among the young.

¹ Hebrew Acronym: Bet Yaacov I'chu ve nelcha - House of Jacob, come ye and let us go (Isaiah 2:5)

² Hebrew: Lovers of Zion

³ Germany's annexation of Austria.

The objective of Zionist nationalism was a Jewish homeland in Palestine. During the 1930s, prior to the establishment of Israel, the essence of Zionism was immigration into Palestine there to recreate this Jewish Commonwealth. The rebirth of the nation depended on reclaiming the soil of the ancient homeland which, through the neglect of two millennia, had turned the land of milk and honey into swamp and desert. Its ideology was to re-educate Jews to become farmers rather than physicians, stevedores rather than solicitors and labourers rather than landlords. In the words of Herzl “*Aus Judenjungen junge Juden zu machen*”¹. To achieve this aim, the Jewish Agency for Palestine, the official body which represented political Zionism, established farms in the Diaspora where young Jews would go on *hachshara*², to be trained in agriculture, horticulture and dairy farming before emigrating to Palestine there to establish Jewish farm settlements and settle the land³.

Opposed to this idea was the fanatical ultra-orthodox *Agudas Yisroel* movement who believed only in Torah study and rejected any secular political ideas. They were exceptional among Jews in their extreme anti-Zionist attitude. Like their predecessors in Russia, they preached that settlement in Palestine prior to the coming of the Messiah was sacrilegious. How they reconciled that position with the unequivocal injunction in the Torah of *Mitzvat Yishuv Eretz Yisrael*⁴ is difficult to understand. When it came to the crunch, some of their leaders were amongst the first to emigrate to Palestine to save their own skins and the damning their souls seemed of secondary importance.

Legend had it that with the passing of the last of the Sofers the “Holy Congregation of Pressburg” would cease to exist. The first Sofer apart, two of the dynasty died at the age of 57 years each having reigned for 33 years. The then incumbent would reach his 57th year in 1938 and it was generally assumed in the Jewish community that if the divinely ordained symmetry persisted, his son would immediately succeed him. When the political skies darkened the last Sofer left for Palestine; a country which he and his ilk preached sinful for Jews to settle before the coming of the Messiah. There was talk that he left Bratislava to escape his destiny. The shepherd abandoned his flock to be ravaged by the wolves and the legend was self-fulfilling. For all intense and purpose, the Holy Congregation of Pressburg ceased to exist. Pressburg appears as one of the destroyed congregations at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.

For completely different reasons, Jewish communist party members would match this rabid anti-Zionism. However, beyond the primary aspiration of the Zionists, the movement was not, as one might expect, homogeneous. In fact, the differences were often expressed in abusive and verbally violent terms. I remember a stanza of a ditty, sang by the political right, that went something like “*Hor wer’n ma reissen von Ben-Gurions Kopf*.”⁵ This schism survives and is reflected in the political infighting that plagues Israeli politics today. With

¹ German: Play on words. To make young Jews out of Jewish louts.

² Hebrew: Preparation

³ Settling the land means establishing kibbutzim in Palestine.

⁴ Hebrew: the duty to settle the Land of Israel.

⁵ Local dialect German: We shall tear the hair out of Ben-Gurion’s head. Ben-Gurion, a socialist, became Israel’s first prime minister.

this sort of hatred in the heart can one wonder at the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin. With hindsight, that which separated them was of much smaller import than that which should have united them in an all-out effort to stave off the impending catastrophe that overtook European Jewry during the war. However, it is easy to be wise after the event.

I would like to be able to say that my conversion to Zionism was as a direct consequence of such “revelations”. But, of course, to a young person it was more the activities of the Zionist youth movement that attracted - ideology came later.

Modern political Jewish history came to me through the Zionist movement. Its ideology reinforced the sentiment that Jews could only escape from the constant see-saw of history by being sovereign, determining their own future and that national strictures would then be the same as for other nations. The alternatives were either eternally repeated periods of suffering or complete assimilation. The conclusion: there were no other alternatives!

In the 1930s Zionism was still quite a recent movement.. It may have been in its infancy but many different political trends were developing - from the extreme Marxist left to the extreme militaristic right. The former turned into “communist fellow-travellers” and the latter, depending on one’s perspective, later became the Irgun freedom fighters or the terrorists. Somewhere in the middle were the social democrats and the religious worker party. Each of these streams had their youth movements.

The Zionist youth movement mirrored the political fragmentation of their elders. It ranged across the political spectrum. On the extreme left, the Marxist *Shomer Hatzair*¹. They arranged for young people to go on *hachshara*. The movement established many kibbutzim, draining malaria ridden swampland and breaking rocks to reclaim the land and make it arable. They claimed to be the *chalutzim*². They believed in a socialist bi-national state in Palestine, with equal rights and duties for both Jews and Arabs, and Utopia was just around the corner. They were iconoclasts. All religion was abjured and anti-clericalism was preached. Darwin was their god and Stalin their paragon. The Bible was considered as no more than the history book of the Jewish people and their Jewish national identity was based on this. Their salute consisted of the upraised right fist and words taken from the Bible: *chazak v'amatz*³.

On the extreme right, the Zionist-revisionist movement of Jabotinsky, a quasi-fascist organisation named after Josef Trumpeldor, a Jewish settler in Galilee, who fought for the Czar against the Japanese at Port Arthur in 1904 where he lost an arm, who later emigrated to Palestine. He died in 1920 aged forty at Tel-Hai in Upper Galilee in a gun fight with Arab marauders. He was presented as a role model whose dying words, one was told, were “it is good to die for our country.” The full title of the movement was Brit Trumpeldor, meaning the Covenant of Trumpeldor. It was generally referred to by the

¹ Hebrew: The young watchman.

² Hebrew: Pioneers.

³ Hebrew: Be strong and courageous.

acronym *Betar*¹. It proudly declared its slogan: “*in blood and fire did Judea fall - in blood and fire shall Judea arise*”. In the creation of the State of Israel that prediction was to find vindication. Its ideology propounded a military solution to the Palestine problem and demanded Jewish sovereignty on both sides of the Jordan river. That expectation remains unfulfilled. The rights of the settled Arab population was hardly considered. The price of this omission is still being paid in blood. The movement did not establish kibbutzim as this smacked of socialism.

Circulars or letters within the organisation were introduced with “Dear Comrade! Tel-Hai! which sounded much like “*Sieg Heil!*” It was the form of address used by the nazis. The militaristic ethos of the *Betar*, its world outlook, the colour of the uniform, the leather belts, cross straps and dagger, the military insignias, the jackboots and leather coats, the *Tel-Hai* salute, and the hierarchical “Führer” structure of the organisation made the obvious charge of fascism easily sustainable. The leadership, however, contradicted this accusation and countered it by defining fascism as having two necessary aspects, that of militarism and that of imperialism. Militarism was readily conceded but imperialism vehemently denied. It asserted that the Jews claimed only that which was rightfully Jewish and that it had no design on other nations territories.

In between the two political extremes was the social-democratic movement, *Maccabi Hatzair*² which was only mildly party political and tolerant of religion. Its members also settled the land. They were keen on sporting activities and their ideas, in essence, was summarised by “Gymnastics, gymnastics, ever more gymnastics”. Finally, there were the religious Zionists, the *Mizrachi*³ also known as *Bne Akiba*, the sons of Akiba - named after Akiba ben Yosef, (50-135 CE), a rabbi who supported Bar Kochba’s revolt and who, in old age, was tortured and martyred by the Romans for this. They thought of themselves as the upholders of the faith who believed in “Torah and work”. Secular politics seemed to be of secondary importance.

All groups rented suites of rooms which were used as clubrooms and organisational offices and in the case of the *Mizrachi*, a prayer room. Each group expected its members to wear tunics of a specified colour. The Marxist wore blue, the Social-democrats white and brown was the chosen colour of the *Betar*. The ultra orthodox, anti-Zionists, did not try to be distinguishable by the colour of their shirts - their well recognised symbolism lay in the long side-locks and black garb. Which organisation a young person joined was affected mostly by peer influence. Youngsters would join less as a reflection of their political persuasion rather as a chance occurrence; one followed one’s friends or preferred the colour of the other movement’s uniform. Under the influence of Egon Szanto, a close childhood friend, a prodigy who was able to

¹ Betar was the last fortress that fell to the Romans in 135 CE in the final stages of the Bar Kochba revolt. The fall of the fortress resulted in the total destruction of the Jewish character of Palestine and must be considered as the final act of Jewish dispossession.

² The young Maccabeans. Maccabi, written in Hebrew as MKBJ, is an acronym for: “who amongst the gods can compare with thee, O Lord”. The warriors of the Hasmonean rebellion against the Seleucid Greeks carried these letters on their war banners not unlike the Romans’ SPQR. The rebellion was led by Judas Maccabeus who took his name from this acronym.

³ Hebrew: One from the East.

read fluently at the age of four, I started with the social democrats and progressed (or regressed?) to the extreme right taking Egon with me. We enjoyed dressing up in the uniform playing at soldiers. The indoctrination came later and indoctrination there was. Our impressionable and pliable minds were brainwashed and ideologically indoctrinated and political attitudes resulted from this.

When I joined the Zionist movement I was taught that in order to create a new Jewish homeland I must be ready to fight and if necessary die fighting. My self-respect as a Jew and as a person required that I stood my ground. In contrast, my home influence was never to stand and fight; it is always better, I was told, to give way or run than to finish with a blooded head or a broken limb; escape was always the better part of valour. Therefore, whatever the evidence, whoever caused a fight, I did get the blame. Instructions were explicit: never make waves; don't draw attention to yourself; disappear within a crowd; keep a low profile, as one says nowadays.

My School Days.

In nearly all cases, elementary, primary and for a sizeable number of Jewish children, secondary education was provided by the Community. It was by and large a well educated community: the fact that nearly a third of students in higher educational institutions were Jews, reflected this.

My elementary school days were quite uneventful. On the 1st September 1933, I started at the Jewish orthodox primary school which was within a short walking distance from the Schlosstrasse where we then lived. The initial excitement of going to school soon wore off when I realised that my playtime was at an end. 1933 was the first academic year in Jewish elementary education when Slovak became the language of tuition for the new intake. This was to my disadvantage because Slovak was a marginal language to me. We spoke and continued to speak only German at home. I was fortunate in that a young, recently qualified person, Herr Safir, became our class teacher. He was keen, not yet jaded, and I made fair progress in learning to read and write. I gradually acclimatised the new language but it never became my main language. In my teens, the poetry and literature I read was German and there was hardly any Slovak literature that attracted me.

I wore a peaked cap at school, during lessons and at play. Wearing a head covering at all times, was the order of the day and, being brought up to see this as the norm, it did not seem out of the ordinary. Contrary to generally accepted behaviour, having one's head uncovered is a sign of disrespect amongst religious Jews. I do not know the origin of this usage. The other item of apparel that observant Jews wear is the *tsitses*¹. It is a rectangular piece of woollen cloth with a rectangular opening for the head so that it will rest on the shoulders. At each of its four corners it has fringes plaited in a very specific way. It is worn at all times, like an undergarment, in fulfilment of a Biblical command². The custom of wearing the fringes on garments goes back to ancient times³. From time to time there was an inspection at school when we had to show that we wore the fringes.

Hardly had I mastered my ABC when I was introduced to a new set of symbols, the Aleph-beth of the Hebrew alphabet. This was taught by *Rebbe*⁴ Moses Schlesinger, a small man with a reddish square beard and little knowledge of the Slovak language. It was he who also gave us religious instructions. He was a pleasant man, modern in his outlook compared to other rabbis of his generation. Once we were able to read the script but, of course, not understanding the words we were voicing, we progressed to reading the *Chumash*⁵ in Hebrew. We had a special book provided. It had two columns,

¹ Yiddish for Hebrew *tsitsit* which has fringes as described in the text.

² Numbers 15:37-41.

³ I have a personal theory about their origin with some supporting evidence. There is in Egyptian hieroglyphs an ideogram for fringes, , having the vocalisation consonants "hbs", to indicate the meaning of clothes and dressing. The Hebrew word for putting on clothes has the consonants "hlbs" a word quite different for the one used for putting on shoes.

⁴ Yiddish: Rabbi.

⁵ Hebrew: The Pentateuch.

the right hand half of the page was in Hebrew and the left hand one held the German translation. Rebbe Schlesinger sat at his desk on a podium and translated a section at a time. We were expected to follow and remember. When it came to our turn, we covered the German translation with our left hand, read the Hebrew text and translated from memory, word by word, line by line, paragraph by paragraph, each child a sentence or two. This experience formed the basis of my Hebrew knowledge and came in useful later.

Attending a Jewish elementary school protected me from the world at large. All my school friends were Jewish as were my playmates. I have no recollection of ever moving out of this environment in my early years. Of course, there were other children about. Occasionally we played together, mostly soccer - Jews v. Christians - but in a good natured manner and, as boys do, we had scraps. We were aware that we belonged to different groups but I cannot recall that we ever fought because of this; usually, quarrels were about an offside when a goal was scored by one side or the other.

I can therefore say that my first ten years of life were carefree. Hitler's entry into Austria in March 1938 changed all that. I was now old enough to be aware of the changing situation. This was mainly because of my parents concern. We had recently moved into a smarter apartment on the Schreibergasse. I heard Mamma say that had this happened earlier we would have stayed put and not moved. The certainties of a child's world were beginning to crumble.

Following Chamberlain's "peace in our time", Hitler occupied the Sudetenland. On the 6th October 1938 Slovakia declared its autonomy and Czechoslovakia became Czecho-Slovakia. One month later, by the arbitration of Vienna, Hitler occupied the south bank of the Danube opposite Bratislava. The stark reality dawned on Jews that our arch enemy was just across a narrow stretch of water. Hungary and Poland not wanting to be left out of the general free for all, occupied Ruthenia, parts of southern and eastern Slovakia and Czech Silesia.

Shortly before this, on the 1st September 1938, I had recently turned eleven, I left the cossetting environment of my Jewish elementary school to face the world outside; on that day I embarked on my education in a state secondary school. Earlier, Papa had taken me to an interview at the Hodža secondary school which had French as its language of tuition. Having failed to be accepted there because my Slovak was not good enough, I was inscribed into a State secondary school where Erwin was a pupil already. My new school was only a few meters up the road from my old one.

To say that starting at this school was a cultural shock is to understate the emotional trauma. It is difficult enough, under normal circumstances, for a young person to move to a new unknown environment. I had to cope with the added trauma of now overt anti-Semitism. Circumstances changed dramatically. I believe that I was one of only 2 or 3 other Jewish students in the class. We all were engulfed equally in the sea of strangeness and could have given one another only scant support if ever we had thought of doing so. I was no longer one among the many but the odd one out. To distort a metaphor, I was the round peg that would not fit into the square hole. Although I was not ostracised, I made

no friends from among my fellow pupils and, except for one episode, which I shall describe later, I was left alone. I have no recollection of the teachers being particularly anti-Jewish, except that the class teacher, a woman, seated me on the last but one bench at the back of the classroom next to a boy from the slums. Since I had little time to settle in, I did not get to know any of them and now can remember not a single face.

But there were advantages. There was no one to inspect my clothing to see that I wore tsitses which, of course, I had discarded. To wear any kind of headgear indoors would have been quite unacceptable.

Religious instruction was compulsory for all denominations. Jewish and Protestant children had an hour per week set aside for this after the end of the school day. Only a handful of Jewish children attended the once weekly religious instructions, Erwin being one of them. Catholics, who formed the majority, had their hour of religion in the classroom during the school day whilst other denominations were given a free period.

My first confrontation across the religious divide occurred after one of these religious instructions. It was near Easter time. On returning to the class room after the free period, I was blatantly accosted by one called Milan, a class-mate, of puny size like myself, directly pointing an accusing finger at me saying: “*Ty si zabil Krista!*”¹. This sudden, unexpected verbal onslaught took me completely off guard. There I stood staring at him and there he stood glaring at me. Both of us, simultaneously ready to fight, keep our distance and not turn tail. The big lads in the class who wanted to see a fight, gathered around us encouraging Milan to hit me. He must have been as frightened as I because we stood our ground for a while, glowering at each other without either making an attempt to land the first blow. From this stand off we were literally saved by the bell, without either losing face: the class room bell for the beginning of the next lesson had been rung. Following this experience one classmate tried to befriend me. He was a Hussite² and anti Catholic. He told me that their churches, like synagogues had no statues because they too considered them idols. This appeared our common bond.

Some few days later, in March 1939, Hitler marched into Prague and declared the provinces of Bohemia and Moravia to be German Protectorates. At the same time, at Hitler’s behest, Slovak fascists proclaimed independence in the rump of the country. They had conspired to this end for some time. At the head of the new government stood a parish priest, one, Father Tiso, who was elected its president. The appointment for prime minister of this puppet state went to an academic, Dr. Tuka, who had previously been imprisoned by the Czechs for treason having attempted to have Slovakia annexed by Hungary and whose knowledge of the Slovak language was restricted. The appointment for the minister of interior went to a failed journalist, a dissolute drunkard and known womaniser, one, called Mach. That was the unholy trinity on whom our fate depended.

¹ Slovak: You killed Christ!

² A follower of the Czech Reform Church founded by Jan Hus, a disciple of Wycliffe. Hus was burned at the stake for heresy.

Less than six months later Hitler's hordes invaded Poland and World War Two with its horrific effect over the lives and deaths of millions of ordinary people of many nations, was set in motion.

One of the first decrees of the new State required that all state schools and institutes of higher learning be cleared of Jews. I thus remained in the state school for less than one academic year before being expelled, together with all other Jewish students. My transfer to the Jewish secondary school was quite painless. I soon got used to attending school on Sundays again. The teachers appeared to be committed and the curriculum was extended well beyond what is usually taught in secondary schools. The school headmaster Sebestyén, or Herr Direktor as he had to be addressed, was a conformist, a stickler and a martinet. So as not to attract attention he strictly forbade any student to open the window on Sundays and look out. On one occasion a school friend did just that; I went over to the window to tell him to shut it when Sebestyén entered the classroom. Explanations were of no avail. He ordered both to his office where we had to bend over to receive the cane. The injustice of this peremptory treatment, the summary justice and the undeserved punishment rankled for a long time after.

The anti-Jewish legislation permitted only eight grades of elementary schooling for Jews so that the compulsory school leaving age was set at 14 years. No higher education was permitted. It is now 1941. I, in common with other fourteen year old Jewish children, was foot loose. There was no further education nor trade schools available to us. The Jewish Community arranged for children to stay on at school voluntarily for a further year. Only about twenty children attended. This arrangement lasted only one academic year before it had to be halted. This final year at the Tedesco co-educational school was my most productive, intellectually and socially. There was no set syllabus and lessons were completely unstructured. The teacher, Herr Rosenthal allowed the young people to develop in any direction they chose. I was very interested in Greek mythology; the teacher provided the books on the subject for me to read at my leisure. I was asked to give a talk on the subject to the class afterwards. I sat at the teacher's desk but I had no idea how to present the topic. The class listened in silence because we were all well behaved but I doubt that I said anything worthwhile. I found myself an avid reader of historical novels and world literature. Reading became an obsession. I read anything that I could lay hands on. The severest punishment that I can remember was to be allowed to read only the daily newspaper for one week. I was fascinated by mathematics. I taught myself Esperanto and translated poetry into it. I wrote an Esperanto text book and tried to get it serialised in a local Jewish paper. I learnt English, Italian and taught myself German shorthand. I even devised my own language. But, not surprisingly, I was the only person to speak it. I wrote heroic poetry copying the styles of Schiller and Goethe. I taught myself to play the mandolin and since I could not at first read music, I devised my own notation. Later I read books about music and taught myself to read it. From my own personal point of view it became the most productive school year of my formal education.

Socially I made friends that lasted for a long time. There was Margalit. Her name in Hebrew means a gem or a pearl. Margalit with her long, black plaited

hair was that to me. She was my first adolescent innocent love affair. We first met at the Tedesco school. In 1942 when we both were fifteen, the relationship between boys and girls was very innocent compared to what it appears to be nowadays at the end of the 20th Century. We formed *zuggim*¹. I remember with some pleasure our long walks *à deux* in the foothills of the Small Carpathians, not yet daring to hold hands but linking arms instead, and discussing very seriously a variety of weighty subjects. I remember the first shy, stolen, surreptitious kiss. Margalit was the daughter of the head of the Zionist movement who later played an important part in the action to save what could be saved of Slovak Jewry. Most of the background to the present recollections come from the book that he wrote after the war.²

There was my bosom friend Hansi, eighteen months younger than I. We formed a very strong relationship and confided the most intimate personal matters to each other. We were inseparable. Together we wrote stage routines for school performances. We even attempted an opera telling the story of Purim. Using music from classical sources we wrote our own libretto. Together we tasted all the fruit forbidden to us by racist laws; more of this later. His father arranged for him to have private tuition in Latin and engaged a tutor. Hansi insisted that I should attend the lessons as well. As I now remember it, I was treated by the tutor as someone he had to tolerate and would have rather done without. Hansi's father was very active within the Jewish Community and he too worked actively during the war for the community. After the war it was through his connections that I managed to obtain a passport which enabled me to travel to England; not an easy thing to procure after the war.

Up to this time, my scholastic achievements were, to put it generously, very mediocre. It was perhaps the expulsion that lit a spark or, maybe, it was just that I was emotionally ready, but I had an instant craving to learn. Where, in the past, not many teachers managed to stimulate my interest in academic work, it was suddenly awakened. From being well down the class in attainment, I suddenly came top in all subjects.

Following my 15th birthday I started a short vocational training course which was run by the community. This was to teach manual skills to the young and provide retraining facilities for adults. Papa who had earlier learnt shirt pattern making now trained to be a plumber, Erwin attended a course of architectural draughtsmanship and I started to learn electrical installation. Following this, Erwin found employment in the architect's department of a ministry; a most fortuitous thing which saved us from deportation in 1942 and therefore saved our lives. Through Erwin's contacts at the ministry Papa found work on a building site laying drains, I started work on a building site, first in an office and later as an electrician.

¹ Hebrew: Twosomes.

² Dr. Oskar Neumann. *Im Schatten des Todes*. Olamenu (1956) Tel-Aviv.

PERSECUTION.

The Thin End Of The Wedge.

It started with sloganising and verbal abuse. “*Slovensko Slovákom, Palestina Židákom*”¹ (please God, we prayed) and “*Jews to Birobijan*”² (God forbid, we said). Then, by some perverse logic, we, Jews, were at one and the same time “exploiting capitalist” and “bloodthirsty Bolsheviks”. “Jewish publicans keep the honest Slovak in a drunken stupor in order to deprive him of his birth-right”, we were accused. They sang their doggerel song to show that we do not really belong: “*Slovaci sme od rodu slovenského pôvodu*”³. Words did not hurt; we recognised them for what they were - Jew baiting propaganda - but it affected us emotionally and gave us a sense of insecurity. There were the more active aspects of Jew baiting which resulted in the desecration of synagogues and the destruction of tombstones in Jewish cemeteries. But this was only the thin end of the wedge. By the time the Jew baiters had turned the screw and reached the broad end of the wedge, Jews were living a twilight existence waiting for the “final solution”. But let me go through the stages one step at a time.

The first news of anti-Jewish action came soon after the Germans annexed Austria. This was now close to home just a few miles across the Danube. One heard rumours that some Austrian Jews were sent to a concentration camp in Dachau where they were maltreated. We read about the dreadful treatment that Austrian Jews were receiving at the hands of their tormentors. Examples that come to mind: Highly respectable and respected business and professional Jews were dragged into the streets and made to scrub the pavements with the local nazis louts standing over them and the population mocking them. There was the petty regulation imported by the Germans that required all Jews to take a middle name: Men, Israel and women, Sarah. These names were added to their identity cards and to make sure that no one mistook them for non Jews, a large letter “J” was stamped on the front page. In retrospect and in the light of what was yet to come, these incidents may seem trivial now but the reports coming out of the annexed Austria were horrifying then. It was bad news but it did not affect us directly except that Mamma had a few cousins who lived in Austria; she was very concerned for them.

Then, Jews in the Burgenland whose families originated from Slovakia were expelled by the Germans with minimal personal possessions. Since the Slovaks were not prepared to accept them, the families were placed in no-man’s-land, on a sand bank in the middle of the river Danube. The old, the young, the sick, the pregnant all without exception or mercy most in unsuitable clothing. Several attempts to permit these unfortunate families to cross into Slovakia were unsuccessful. The Jews of Bratislava supplied them medical assistance and arranged a collection of clothing and food from the

¹ Slovak: Slovakia for the Slovaks, Palestine for the Yids.

² An autonomous region of the Soviet Union which Stalin decreed should be a Jewish Homeland with Yiddish as its official language.

³ Slovak: Slovaks we by birth, Slovaks by descent.

community. I remember Mamma empty half the larder for this purpose. The Jewish leadership acquired an old river steamer and obtained permission to transfer the hapless people to it. This gave the refugees more protection from the elements. After further intervention in different high places some basic humanity prevailed and they were allowed to enter Slovakia to be placed in a transit camp. At this point we heard that my mother's cousin and his wife were amongst those expelled from the Burgenland. After some time the camp was disbanded and Onkel and Tante Sidon¹, as we called them, came to Bratislava. My parents found a one roomed apartment on the Judengasse and furnished it. Onkel Sidon was a jolly fellow, I remember him well and I was very fond of him.

This event was followed by a similar incident which resulted from Hungary's occupation of part of Slovakia. The Hungarians considered the Jews who they inherited as Slovaks and put them across their border into no-man's-land that separated the two countries. As one might expect, the Slovaks thought of them as Hungarians and would not let them in. It was early November. These poor souls who no one wanted, lived in the open between the frontier barriers separating the two countries. They had no shelter. It took much effort to persuade the Slovak government to permit the erection of tents and flimsy huts to give the refugees some shelter. The Jews of Bratislava provided the wherewithal of everyday needs. After much further persuasion the families were allowed to enter the country with the proviso that the Jewish community undertook their emigration at an early date. Both incidents occurred during Slovak autonomy within Czecho-Slovakia.

Some time after independence, Slovakia published its Constitution. I remember well the day when headmaster Sebestyén read to the class the article of the Constitution which guaranteed equal rights to all national and religious groups within the State. I remember the smile of satisfaction on his face. He obviously believed in the good faith of authority. His smile must have soon faded when he realised that we were beyond the pale, outside the law; constitutional rights were not for the likes of us. As far as the now disenfranchised Jews were concerned, it was just so many words printed on paper. In fact, after full independence anti-Jewish regulations accelerated considerably.

A whole new legal codex was created. The Nuremberg racial laws were copied into the legislation of Slovakia.³ This introduced a special category: the half and the quarter Jew depending on what proportion of "Jewish blood" circulated in their veins. Jewish halachic law adjudicates on the question of who is a Jew based on the maxim: *Pater incertus mater certissima est*². The Germans made no such distinction. Thus many people who Jews did not consider Jews by their laws had to suffer most of the indignities to which Jews were subjected.

The process of restrictions was insidious and the early anti-Jewish regulation affected only the few. It was as if the new rulers were trying their hand at anti-Jewish legislation but had not yet decided how far to go. It reads like a list.

¹ German: Uncle and Aunt Sidon. ²Latin: Fatherhood is uncertain but motherhood is always certain.

³ Slovenský zákoník. Gazette for the publication of legal code enacted by parliament. See Appendix.

Sexual relations between Jew and Aryan forbidden and the non-Jewish marriage partner encouraged to institute divorce proceedings. Jews not permitted to employ Aryans for any purpose. Jewish motor vehicles were confiscated and later Jews had to surrender their driving licences. This was followed by a decree that forced Jews to relinquish bicycles, cameras, furs and leather coats. Stamp collections were confiscated. All jewellery, silver and gold except wedding rings had to be deposited with the National Bank. Under the pretext that Jews spread enemy propaganda, radios were sequestered. Jews were deprived of the telephone so that they should not communicate with “enemies” abroad.

After that, the pace quickened further. Jews were forbidden to practise their profession. Decrees were now designed to exclude the Jewish intelligentsia from the intellectual and cultural life. A new phrase appeared “*Für Juden verboten!*”¹. Jews were banned from frequenting theatres, cinemas, exhibitions or attend concert performances. All social intercourse between Jew and non-Jew prohibited. Jews banned from social gatherings and prohibited from patronising restaurants, coffee houses, swimming pools, public parks and gardens.

Next, Jews were eliminated from the commercial life of the country. First, a special 20% property tax was levied on Jews for which the whole Jewish community was collectively responsible; then Jews had to surrender share certificates and the deeds to all properties they owned. The new Jewish hospital was sequestered. There was enforced closure of small, one man businesses. That decree put my parents out of business and their earning capacity was taken from them at a stroke. Bank accounts were frozen and the account holders were permitted to withdraw 150 crowns weekly approximately £1 (\$4) at 1939 value; not enough to keep body and soul together. This did not affect my parents very much because they had lost faith in banks after the great crash of 1929. My parents kept their savings in a tin box hidden in the larder amongst all the goodies. A new word was coined “aryanization”. It meant that an Aryan could expropriate the business enterprise belonging to a Jew without compensation simply by applying for it and then put the now ex-owner, into the street. All Jewish employees of that enterprise were summarily dismissed. Being without employment was a serious matter. Two forced labour camps, at Sered and Novaky, were established into which unemployed Jews were forcibly directed. Avri was one such victim. He worked as an accountant for a Jewish electrical contractor. When this firm was aryanised Avri was dismissed. One day whilst looking for work he was stopped in the street by the police and asked to identify himself. He had acquired forged aryan papers but in the heat of the moment his courage failed him and he produced the identity card that showed that he was Jewish. He was taken to the police station at the Old Town Hall. Before being searched he asked to go to the toilet where he flushed his forged documents down the toilet. He spent two nights in a prison cell at the Old Town Hall and was then sent to the labour camp in Sered.

Then followed restrictions of residence. A list of all Jewish residents had to be displayed inside the main entrance of every building. Jews living in certain

¹ German: Jews excluded.

areas or buildings had their leases terminated and had to move out with only a few days notice. This affected our family. I must have trusted my parents a great deal because I do not recall a traumatic experience but I can now imagine my parents' concern and worry: eight people had to be re-housed. We had no place to go. It was summer and the schools were on vacation. At the last moment the Jewish Community allocated us a class room in the Jewish elementary school as temporary shelter. We had a roof over our heads. A few weeks later we had to share the class room with another dislodged family, a thin curtain dividing the two. Before the end of the summer my parents found an apartment in the Judengasse number 59, the same building where the Sidons lived. It consisted of one bedroom and a kitchen and an outside WC. We were no less crowded than in the classroom but we had our own front door.

Restrictions on movement came at about the same time. A curfew for Jews was declared to last from 6 p.m. to 8 a.m. in winter and 9 p.m. to 8 a.m. in the summer. During the hours of the curfew one became a prisoner. The indiscriminate search of apartments without a warrant at any time of day or night by any person in uniform was permitted or at least was not questioned. The task was simplified by the list of Jews resident in the building which was exhibited in its entrance. I recall one such unannounced visit. A sharp imperious knock on the door; enter two men, one in the black uniform of the HG, the Hlinková garda¹, and the other a brown shirt of the local German FS, the *Freiwillige Schutzstaffel*². Without asking for permission they took an inventory of all movable assets.

To assist the control of mobility, Jews had to be easily identifiable. A law was enacted that required all Jews over the age of six years to wear a glaring six pointed yellow star, 6 cm in size, edged in blue, which had to be permanently sewn on to the outer garment.³ It seemed even more spiteful that the compulsory wearing of this star was to be effective from the 22nd September 1941, the date of the Jewish New Year 5702. It was an offence to conceal this star. Following its introduction I did not leave the house for a week and when at last I ventured out, I restricted my first tentative steps to the Jewish areas. A star of the same dimensions had to be affixed to the front door of every Jewish residence. Jews mark the door posts of their homes with a mezuzah⁴ as a public witness to their faith. However, whilst the mezuzah was a voluntary act, the star was an imposition. It seemed like tautology: This is a Jewish house; this is a Jew's house.

Converts who took baptism after March 1939 were not immune to the restrictions imposed on Jews and were not exempt from wearing the star. The wearing of the Jews' star appeared to have caused a problem for some neophytes. To show that they were serious in their conversion they wanted to be seen to attend church regularly. They therefore tended to occupy the front pews where the priest could see them. There they were, fingering their rosaries, saying their Hail Mary, taking communion, standing in line waiting

¹ Slovak fascist guards mimicking the Italian fascisti and the German SS.

² Voluntary security squadron. A Nazi organization of the local German minority.

³ Ordinance of the Ministry of Interior no.401/1941

⁴ A parchment scroll containing scriptural text placed in a case.

for the Host and the yellow star conspicuously staring everyone in the eye. It must have seemed as if the Jews had taken over the churches. To lessen the public embarrassment caused by seeing people with yellow stars enter churches, a detachable yellow plastic star made into a pin was introduced. Communicants were permitted to remove the pin on entry to and during the service in church. So the fixed star changed for some people at least, to the removable pin star. The fixed star was later enlarged to 10 cm and in its final reincarnation the word “Žid”¹ was inscribed in large black letters.

The wearing of the star was intended as a sign of shame but some wore the star as a sign of honour. A very special sort of courage was needed to do this. I have since read that when similar regulations were introduced in Denmark, the King of Denmark fixed a star to his coat and went out walking. The whole Danish nation followed suit and the Germans had to withdraw the decree. Later, when the Germans attempted to deport Danish Jews to ghettos and concentration camps in Poland, the Danes spirited 7906 of their Jewish compatriots out of Denmark into Sweden leaving a mere 500 behind. But my compatriots were not Danes, Slovaks were made of sterner stuff: no Jew lovers they! On the contrary, large billboards showing a caricature of a Jew wearing a star were posted on big hoarding: the public was exhorted with the legend: “*That’s the one! That’s how you recognise him!*” I did not have that special courage to wear the star proudly. I was ashamed of the stereotype and could not identify with the caricature. The star made me self conscious, it was a stigma, it restricted my personal freedom of movement and I tried to hide it as much as possible. Being found without a star was a serious offence which would result in deportation to a forced labour camp. Now, on reflection, the risk to me and to my immediate family, if caught, was extreme. As a young person I did not see it in those terms. At least I did not think that I would get caught. Was it perhaps my way of rebelling against parental advice and authority?

I was taught to keep a low profile, to merge into the background. It was not just my parents who took that attitude but it was the approach of most Jewish parents. Keep your head down, keep your nose clean and the goyim may forget that you exist and let you get on with your life. But it was not possible to wear the star and keep a low profile. There was an inherent contradiction in this. The star acted as a magnet. It attracted the mob but especially the Hitler Youths. I recall walking home in broad daylight past a building in which a detachment of these official hooligans paraded in the yard. I looked in as they looked out. I noticed several of them breaking rank and walking towards the exit. I took an immediate turn to the left hoping that they might walk on; they didn’t - they followed and caught up with me. I was surrounded and whilst being knocked about I was verbally abused for the “*jüdischer Schweinehund*”² that I was. I had run the gauntlet of the Hitler youth, I had been through the baptism of fire. I was, from this time on, forever looking over my shoulder. When I told of this experience at home, I got no sympathy. I was told that I should not have taken that route in the first place. On another occasion I was all dressed up going some place. Not far from the Judengasse where we then

¹ Slovak: Jew

² German abuse: Jewish pig of a dog.

lived, there was an one roomed office used as a sub station by the police. On the way to wherever I was going I had to go past it. Outside it stood a policeman and a man in the Nazi brown shirt. As I approached I remember having a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. I was stopped with “come inside Jew”. I took fright. The immediate reaction to fear is flight. I reacted intuitively and run, hoping to escape. The policeman not wanting to lose his quarry gave chase and caught me. I was dragged back to the police room. I was petrified, dumb struck with fear. “Have you no greetings when you enter a room?” I was asked. I did not know what they expected me to say. Instead of simply saying “*Dobrý deň*”¹, in my young innocence I raised my right arm in the fascist salute and said “*Na stráž!*”². That made it worse for me. How dare a Jew use their salute. I was roughed up and made to clear out their fire-grate. My clean clothes were filthy. I returned home. My mother still believed in the rule of law. I was not even allowed the benefit of the doubt. She could not accept that a policeman would chase after me and hit me had I not done something wrong.

Further restrictions on the movement of Jews were published. Jews were not allowed to travel in express trains or use dining cars. Travel on other trains was allowed with a permit but only in special “Jewish compartments”. This was later followed by a complete travel ban. In towns, Jews were restricted to using the rear platform on trams; on buses they were limited to standing room only provided such room was available. Jews had to leave the bus during any part of journey if the space was required by an Aryan.

I can recall two very specific memories relating to travel.

I went on a two weeks’ visit to a farm which the Zionist movement created to re-educate young people and to teach them farming skills. It was a wonderful experience to be out of the city, in the country and to live in a small community of fellow believers. I do not remember what age I was, no older than 11 or 12 because it must have been in the early stages of anti-Jewish restrictions when I was still permitted to travel back to Bratislava on the train. I had spent most of my pocket money and had left myself with just enough change to pay my tram fare from the railway station, about two miles from my home. I had forgotten that, at the discretion of the tram conductor, a charge for a suitcase could be made. I boarded the tram wearing the regulation star and stood, as I had to, on the rear platform of the tram. The tram set off and the conductor called for the fare. I handed over the money but the conductor asked for the fare due for the suitcase. When I told him that I had no more money he rung the bell, the tram stopped and spitting out his words like venom, said: “get off the tram Jew boy!” For a small child the suitcase was quite a heavy load and I transferred its weight every few steps from one hand to the other. Just as I wondered how long it would take me to get home, a fiacre drew up and the driver reined in his horse. The old gentleman leaned over and ask whether I needed the cab. When I told him that I had not enough money to pay the fare he asked me to get on just the same and this, in spite of the star. He dropped me a few hundred yards from where we lived and when I offered him the little money I had, he would not take it. I insisted but it was no

¹ Slovak: Good day.

² Slovak: On guard. The Official fascist greeting mimicking the German “Heil Hitler”.

more than he would have received for a tip. This was a salutary lesson. Fate had struck a fortunate balance: the Jew hater and the kindly human being. I was to find time and again that there were some decent people left and it helped to preserve my own humanity.

At the age of 16 I was working as an electrician on a building site on the outskirts of town. Work started about 6.30 in the morning and I had to take the trolley bus to get there. I was in the habit of not wearing the yellow star and took my seat on the bus each morning without ever being challenged. Each day, part way into the journey a short burly person aged about 30 boarded the bus. On one occasion when the bus was quite full, he got on and came towards me and stood up against me. "Get up you stinking Jew" he said and pulled me up by my nose. I could hide my star but I could not hide my nose! I got up and vacated the seat without protest; I had obviously been uncovered. The story does not, however, end there. A man standing next to me told the burly man to leave me in peace. To this my tormentor replied that he too was a Jew. He did indeed look Jewish and I am sure that he was; after all it takes one to know one. The man did not respond. At the end of the journey when we all alighted the Jewish looking man took the other man to task with words to the effect "who then is a Jew?" and promptly beat up my tormentor. I was full of admiration of the man's pluckiness and hischutzpah and wished that I had had it in me to react similarly.

Restrictive decrees came thick and fast. No change of domicile was allowed without prior permission. We were not permitted to congregate publicly. Contact between Jew and Aryan strictly forbidden. Random identification checks of Jews on the streets were the norm. The kosher abattoir was closed down. Rujda, the kosher butcher only sold delicatessen imported from Hungary. On one occasion, my parents bought meat that had not been ritually killed. They compromised by kashering¹ it. My parents did not eat the meat but obviously felt that their children should not be deprived of it. They must have wrestled with their consciences for a long time but, in the end, their children's well being tipped the scales.

Hoping against hope that each anti-Jewish regulation would be the last we sat and waited. The process of attrition was nearly complete. The mousetrap had sprung shut and we were caught inside it. Dark clouds could be seen on the political horizon.

It is possible to gain the impression that during this period, Jews did nothing to protect themselves. Within the constraints on movement and communication imposed by the State system, resisting the system itself was not possible: the options open were few. Jewish activities were directed to minimising the noxious result of anti-Jewish legislation. This was done either on a personal level or by the leaders for the community.

Right up to the beginning of the war most families suffered from emigration fever. Emigration was the reflex reaction. But, there were no countries who

¹ Yiddish: To make kosher. This is done by salting and then soaking the meat for a prescribed time so that all blood is drain from it. Of course, kashering non-kosher meat does not make it kosher.

would take the Jews of Europe and save them from the cataclysmic fate awaiting them. In July 1938 a conference at Evian attended by 32 nations was called to discuss the problem of Jewish refugees. All delegates expressed sympathy with the plight of the Jews but none was prepared to increase its immigration quota. Like the chorus in a Greek play they observed and commented from the side lines but took no action to influence the outcome. Of course, if one was some famous person, a scientist, musician, literary star or a person of great fortune one had little difficulty in finding a refuge. But the small man, the ordinary law abiding Jewish citizen was left to his fate. There was just indifference: only crocodile tears were shed over his likely fate. For him it was not a question of where to go but who would have him; and there were none.

The obvious place for people with Zionist ideals was emigration to Eretz¹. The British Government who ruled Palestine, a territory mandated to Britain by the League of Nations expressly for the establishment of a Jewish Homeland, issued a White Paper which restricted the number of Jews allowed entry to that country. The Jewish Agency for Palestine was given an annual allocation of certificates for distribution to those intended on immigration to that country. They, in turn, allocated these mostly to children. There were no certificates available for whole families and not many parents were willing, initially at least, to let young children fly the nest. That might have been just as well because the numbers allocated to Slovak Jewry were counted in a few hundred at most.

There remained the second option of illegal entry into Palestine. A few boatloads with families managed to get away. The boats were mostly unseaworthy hulks crowded with a mass of humanity escaping from active persecution. Initially, when caught by the Royal Navy or the Palestine Police, the number of certificates issued were reduced by the number of illegal immigrants apprehended. Later such immigrants were interned and later still, during the early stages of the war, the then British Government put pressure on the Turks not to let boats carrying illegal immigrants to Palestine pass through the straits of the Bosphorus. The cattle boat "Struma" with 769 people on board was detained for two months and then turned back into the Black Sea where it was torpedoed by a Soviet submarine. All but one person perished.

The United States option was very restricted. The USA run an immigration policy which allotted a given number of visas to each country. Once this yearly quota for a given country was filled no further visas were issued. This produced the anomaly where people who needed to emigrate found the doors shut whilst those who did not, were able to obtain immigration visas nearly instantly. My parents registered with the US Embassy in the hope that we may be given an "Affidavit" as we called it. The fees were paid but beyond possibly receiving a letter of acknowledgement, we heard nothing further.

The feeble attempt at emigration to the United States apart, we had a rather sad experience which first raised our hopes only to dash them later. One apartment in the Schreibergasse was occupied by a young Jewish woman who

¹ Jews in Central Europe referred to Palestine as Eretz which is short for Eretz Yisrael, the Land of Israel.

originated from Vienna but was married to a local man. She seemed rather lonely and by and by the family befriended her. To ingratiate herself she claimed that she had some connections and that she could help with the obtaining of emigration papers. I forget whether it was to Palestine or to the USA. She was so convincing that my parents bought new outfits for all the family to tide them over the first few years in a new country. She produced letters which, it later turned out, she wrote herself and, to add insult to injury, borrowing our typewriter to do so. It was quite a let down. It shows how desperate and naive my parents must have been to be so gullible.

The United Kingdom allowed a few Jewish children from Germany to enter Britain. Some others were permitted to come to Britain for the purpose of studying at a Yeshiva. Generally, however, the UK Government took a position similar to the one it recently took towards the Hong Kong Chinese. To those who have shall be given. Rumour had it that entry into the United Kingdom was restricted to people who could show assets of £5,000 (\$20,000) per person. For our family this amounted to £40,000 (\$160,000), an enormous sum in 1938 and by present values perhaps equivalent to £500,000 (\$750,000), perhaps more. Hard working people my parents were, financiers they were not. They had little idea of the world of money. On one occasion they heard a rumour that an insurance company with which they had taken out an annuity was on the point of collapse. Fearing that they would lose the investment, they encashed the policy and lost a substantial amount of money. The rumour, of course, was false. On another occasion my father went to the tin box where they kept their savings only to find that some of the notes were rust stained. In Britain, that would not have been a problem. In Czechoslovakia, damaged bank notes could be paid only through a bank who would deduct a percentage of the face value depending on the extent of the damage sustained by the notes. Again, my parents lost out. On one single occasion I remember my parents counting their life savings which they kept in a tin box. I cannot recall the reason why they did this. It amounted to some 35,000 crowns which, by present day values is roughly equivalent to £5,000 (\$7,500). Not a lot of saving for a life of honest work. My parents had saved it by hard graft, by skimping and scraping, saving pennies by walking rather than taking the tram, by denying themselves simple pleasures like going to the cinema. I recall an occasion when Avri presented them with tickets to a performance. They had not been to the cinema for ten years or more. Even after half a century I need not even close my eyes to see the joy on their faces and I clearly remember their excitement.

There were some individuals who paid large bribes to corrupt diplomats of some South American Banana Republic (I think it was San Salvador) in return for passports. These passports could not be used for leaving the country because no visas could be obtained; but, with the possession of these documents they hoped to be considered aliens under the protection of a foreign government and therefore escape restrictions placed on resident Jews. When, in the end, it came to the crunch it made little difference to the Slovaks or the Germans and these "South Americans" shared the fate of the rest of the community. Some managed to obtain legitimate Hungarian passports. Hansi's

father was one of those and he and his family travelled to Budapest on holiday. I remember Hansi telling me about the wonders of Budapest.

The fact that Papa was not a native of Czechoslovakia but technically still a Romanian was something that was never admitted publicly and only rarely talked about in the privacy of the home and then in hushed voices. I was always very proud that Papa was different from my friends' fathers and I never quite understood what all the secrecy was about. It was a situation which always bothered Mamma, made her very unhappy and must have given her a sense of insecurity because it made her and us aliens. My parents spent a great deal of money on solicitors who tried to obtain Czechoslovak citizenship for Papa but his lack of knowledge of the Slovak language was the great stumbling block. They now tried to take advantage of this situation. Papa still had in his possession an expired Romanian passport. He decided to visit the Romanian Consulate to try to re-instate his Romanian citizenship and to have his passport renewed. I remember being quite excited by the prospect of becoming a Romanian. I bought a textbook to teach myself Romanian. There was an air of expectancy about the house the day Papa attended the appointment at the Consulate only to be dashed a few hours later. Of course, I do not know how strongly Papa argued his case or how easily he was fobbed off. Obviously, the Rumanians were not all that keen to have a Jewish family on their "books", after all they had a fascist dictatorship at home.

On a personal level it was every man for himself. We all tried to minimise the restrictions in different ways. The most effective way of escaping from the restrictions was a complete change of identity. It needed much arrogance and self-assurance if one wanted to get away with it. But, in the first instance, it required the purchase or the manufacture of forged documents in a false name which showed the owner to be an Aryan. The desire to avoid the restrictions led me into forging documents at a very early age. To a person who has not experienced persecution, forgery sounds a very criminal act. Without doubt, under normal circumstances, it is. I felt not the slightest misgiving at the time. I am equally certain, even after half a century of reflection, that when it comes to escaping from unjust, immoral and discriminatory legislation which ultimately lead to the gas chambers, all counter measures are justifiable and necessary, including armed resistance.

In Slovakia everyone resident within its territory was legally required to register with the police an address of residence or a change of it. Upon registration the police issued a certificate on which appeared the relevant details of name, address and nationality. These details were sometimes hand written and sometimes typed. One was unable to register a change of address without presenting the previous certificate. The certificate appeared in different colours; one colour for citizens, one for resident foreigners another for temporary residents. White was the colour for citizens.

Whilst I was working in the office on a building site one of the jobs allocated to me was to help with the registration of labourers who lived in the hostel provided by the building company. The certificates were filed in the office in an alphabetical card index.

My first attempt at forgery started with the stealing of a white registration certificate from the office. I had sufficient foresight (or was it cunning) to steal one belonging to a person who had only just entered employment so that the certificate would not be wanted for a considerable time. I also made sure that the details on it were hand written. I already knew of some chemicals which removed ink marks from paper leaving no visible sign of previous marks and making the paper virgin white. The chemicals came in two small bottles and were freely available on the shelves of shops selling office requisites. I cleaned the certificate of all writing and then proceeded to type the new information on to it. The choice of a new identity was a bit of a problem. I would have liked to keep my own initials but I could not think of a Slovak first names starting with H that I liked. In the end, I settled on Milan Sýkora.

A few weeks later the employee left the hostel. I had not picked too well. An unsuccessful search for his registration certificate was made. No one could explain how it got lost. I do not know how, but I kept very cool and looked very innocent.

Although the registration certificate was an identification of a sort it was not really sufficient. An identity card with a photograph was required. There was not one standard form of identity card: most districts had their own design and one authority was unlikely to know the format issued by another. I took advantage of this fact. It was possible to obtain on the black market blank identity cards of some outlying district. Because identity cards were numbered manually the ones obtainable could have been simple forgeries or stolen from some store. From my point of view it didn't really matter which. The problem now was how to copy the rubber stamp which showed across the photograph. Erwin, the good draughtsman, did that. By the time the document was finished it looked quite authentic.

Fortunately I only had to show this identity card on one occasion. I went cycling with a gentile girl I knew, of course, on a borrowed bicycle and without wearing the yellow star. I was committing a triple offence. We decided to cycle into the countryside. We travelled along quite happily, two abreast, she on the near side and I on the outside. We came to a cross road where the traffic was controlled by a policeman. There was hardly any traffic on the road. As we approached the junction the policeman on point duty raised his hand to stop us and beckoned me to come across. Because he pointed only to me, my heart must have missed more than one beat. The immediate thought was - he stopped me because he recognised me as a Jew. There was no way that I would run away this time. I moved across to him but the girl stayed well away at the edge of the pavement. He asked to see my identity card. Now, I of course carried two, left inside pocket my own and right inside pocket the forged one. In the moment of excitement I forgot which card was in which pocket. I only just remembered in time to use my left hand to reach into my right inside jacket pocket and I handed the identity card for inspection. He looked at it for a minute whilst my heart went thumpity thump. He handed it back and said that I had committed an offence cycling two abreast, that he

would let me off this time but not to catch me at it again. I made damn sure that he would not.

A young person's mind works very deviously under conditions of stress. I visualised a situation where I presented my false identity papers and because of my Jewish looks would be challenged to pull down my pants to prove that I was not. I forged a medical note which certified that I had suffered from phimosis¹. I was really too naive to realise that if my papers did not pass muster on first inspection, there was no hope after. I was therefore lucky that I was never required to produce it.

The Zionist organisation was proscribed in September 1939 but Jewish cultural and youth organisations were permitted for a while longer. The State introduced a body which became known as the “*Ústredna Židov*”², ÚŽ for short. Since fascism required a leader, the government appointed a “*Starosta*”³ who was personally responsible to the government to put into effect its directives relating to Jews. He had the authority to deal with all matters in the Jewish community which arose as a result of government regulation. He was allowed to appoint a committee but was not obliged to act on its advice. The first Starosta died shortly after taking office and the government appointed Sebestyén, my headmaster, to this office. Sebestyén was naive, punctilious, a pedant and a person of little vision or imagination. He was servile to authority. There was an anecdote which clearly shows what the community thought of the Elder Sebestyén. The tale is, what in German is called *Galgenhumor*⁴. The story has it that Sebestyén was informed by the German authorities that all Jews had been sentenced to death by hanging. Furthermore, the ÚŽ were to carry out the executions. Without batting an eyelid Sebestyén replies: “Yes, Sir! May I take the liberty to ask a question. Is the ÚŽ to supply the ropes?”.

¹ A medical condition due to the contraction of the opening of the foreskin which can be corrected by circumcision.

² Slovak: Central Agency for Jews.

³ Slovak: Elder.

⁴ German: Grim humour. Literally it translates as humour of the gallows.

The Gathering Storm.

We were now virtual prisoners. No one seemed to care. At least so it seemed. There was talk that the Papal Nuncio took the president, Father Tiso, to task about the anti-Jewish ordinances. If the emissary did in fact do so it obviously had little effect on Tiso. It must have been wishful thinking on our part. It must have been we who, in our misery, fantasised, creating self circulating rumours which grew with the telling. It must have been we who, in our helpless despair, invented imaginary straws to clutch. Now, having read some history of the last war, I realise that if, as appears, the Holy See had no influence on the Italian scene it could not have had much say in Slovakia: or, was it perhaps, as has been suggested by some sources, that the Holy Father acted like Pontius Pilate and washed his hands saying that it was not his doing.

The great mass of the nation was either actively anti-Jewish or accepted the state of affairs tacitly. Some, who had a conscience, may have condemned the persecution privately but, if they did, they never spoke out publicly. But there were some who had humanity. In stark contrast to the State President Father Tiso's hatred of Jews, there was Father Augustin Pozdech who assisted them. Of course, he was quite happy to baptise Jews who requested this because he was in the business of saving souls. But, to his credit, he also issued pre-dated baptismal certificates to some Jews without insisting on their conversion unless they wished it. Father Pozdech's presbytery was searched and he himself was arrested by the police on several occasions. When the news of the horrifying events in Auschwitz started to trickle through to the few in the know, Pozdech, using church channels and at an obvious risk to himself, helped to alert London to the mass murder being perpetrated by the Germans. We now know that London found these reports exaggerated and fanciful. Father Pozdech counts amongst the few righteous gentiles. I am sure that there must have been many individual gentiles who were sickened by the persecution and who, at great risk to themselves and to their families, assisted individual Jewish friends, selflessly and without reward: their heroism remains unrecorded. I have nothing but contempt and disgust for the Jew baiters: as to those who disliked what they saw but did nothing to help nor speak out against these crimes, before passing judgement on them I must ask myself where I would have stood had I been in their place. In all honesty I cannot be sure.

Hitler's armies go from victory to victory and sweep everything in front of them. France and the Low countries fall with hardly any resistance. Great Britain retrenches behind the English Channel. Yugoslavia and Greece succumb to the onslaught within a few days. Norway and Denmark are occupied. There is talk of an invasion of Britain and its eventual surrender. There is general euphoria amongst the population but dejection, despair and despondency in the Jewish Community.

Sensation! Hitler attacks the Soviet Union. We are animated, hearts beat joyously. Now Hitler will be taught a lesson. There is at last light at the end of the tunnel. It is a false dawn. The elation is short lived. The Soviets are in full retreat: Hitler's armies are at Leningrad, at Stalingrad and in front of the gates of Moscow. In North Africa Britain is withdrawing and Rommel is pushing

towards Cairo. There appears the danger that the German armies in the East and in North Africa will meet somewhere in the Middle East.

The winter of 1941 is cruel. It is bitterly cold. For the first time the Germans collect for the "*Winterhilfe*"¹. We are permitted to retain two summer outfits, only one winter outfit and one winter coat; the rest is supposed to go to the Germans.

Hitler's armies get stalled by the Russian winter and the fierce resistance of the Red Army. God bless Uncle Joe! Rommel retreats from Alamein. Good old Monty! Obituaries start appearing in the "*Grenzbote*", the local German press "*we proudly announce that our beloved son XYZ died for the Führer*". "*He gave his life for a Greater Germany - the proud parents*". The black bordered boxes become more frequent and there are more of them week by week.

Outrage by the Germans. Whilst our sons die in Russia the Jews are living in luxury. The press speaks of solving the Jewish problem once and for all. "*Let the work shy parasites pay their debt to the Slovak people by hard labour*". "*Get rid of the bloodsuckers who feed on our blood*". "*Cut out the cancer that afflicts the Slovak nation*". Newspapers demand that towns and villages must be cleared of Jews and that they must be isolated in camps. Soon after, a few families are forcibly relocated from Bratislava to Humene, a small town in eastern Slovakia.

Japan attacks Pearl Harbour. Germany declares war on the USA which enters the fray. Dare one hope at last? is there light at the end of this seemingly endless tunnel after all?

February 1942. An ordinance. All Jewish males between the ages of 16 and 45 and all single, divorced and widowed females of the same age groups not having dependants under the age of 16 years must report to the police for assessment of their ability to work. I am not yet 15 years old and escape this muster.

It was the ides of March when the storm broke. Moravek, the chairman of the Central Economic Department instructed starosta Sebestyén to assemble members of the Committee of the ÚŽ. Both Moravek and SS Hauptsturmführer von Wisliceny² came to the meeting. Moravek read a statement which amounted to a death sentence on the 90,000 Jews of Slovakia. "The Slovak government" he said, "had decided to relocate the Jews living in its territory, to Poland. There they will be given the opportunity to build new homesteads, to be self-governing and everyone will be able to work according to his ability. Advance parties of the young able-bodied will prepare facilities for their families to follow. All those to be relocated would be permitted to take 50 kg of personal luggage."

Moravek was followed by the SS Hauptsturmführer. "The Aryans could not be expected to fight on all fronts and do hard physical war work whilst the Jews stood idly by. The Slovak State has no economic need for its Jews. Conse-

¹ German: Winter-aid. Collection of money and clothing for Germany's needy.

² Adolf Eichmann's plenipotentiary for Slovakia.

quently, they will be relocated in a new *Lebensraum*¹ which the German Reich has allocated for that purpose. You Jews will be given the opportunity to maintain yourselves there by honest work.”

Starosta Sebestyén accepted the dictat and did not object on the grounds that the proposed relocation of the entire Jewish community, citizens of the Republic, to a foreign country was unconstitutional and illegal. He had perhaps forgotten the pride with which, not many months earlier, he had read to us the article of the constitution that guaranteed equality under the law to all citizens irrespective of religious confession and this did not exclude the Jews. Perhaps it was fear to gainsay the tormentors or perhaps it was his innate subservience to authority that made him accept this death sentence without question.

Not until May 1942, at a point when a third of Slovak Jewry had already been deported under inhuman conditions and had been surrendered to the jurisdiction of an alien power inimical to them, did the Slovak parliament attempt to legalise its action. It passed a law which permitted the removal of its Jewish citizens from its territory. The law was retroactive so that people who already had been deported were, post factum, stripped of their citizenship and had their assets confiscated by the State. In as much as all laws must have a moral basis to have some claim to legality and to acceptance by a civilised world, this law was monstrous and has all the hallmarks of illegality.

¹ German: Living space.

The Tempest.

Panic. Despairing parents. A last attempt by a few to escape across to Hungary. It is late March 1942. It is the middle of the night. A pounding on the door. "You have 10 minutes to pack". A final embrace. "Please God let this be a bad dream! Let me wake up!" But it is all too real. The door is slammed. It is all finished. Jewish parents are robbed of a 1000 of their precious daughters. Not for a day, not for a week, not for a month but for ever. Desperate mothers scream and lament and faint from the anguish and the agony. The girls are taken to the "*Patronka*" an old empty munitions factory with Colonel Vašina of the Hlinková garda in charge. No food is provided. The authorities are not prepared to spend a single crown on provisions for Jews. The girls are fed from the Jewish soup kitchen. The food is taken to them by Jonas Eckstein. He manages to talk to some of the dazed girls; he reports that the girls are vilified by their guards. A few days later the girls are marched to the railway station in a long column under strict military escort of heavily armed guardists and FS. The heavens open. The girls put blankets over their heads for some protection but they arrive at the railway terminus drenched. They have no change of clothing; mercilessly they are loaded into the transport. The first transport of one thousand Jewish girls leaves Bratislava for they know not where in Poland. It was reported that as the train steamed out of the station the strains of "*Kol od balevav*"¹ could be heard from the transport. A few days later Jewish girls in the provinces were rounded up and transported to Auschwitz. Not long after, it was the turn of the men to follow the same road to their Calvary: amongst them many school friends just a few months older than I. Then followed the first transport of families which was made up of those who, earlier, were forcibly relocated to the east of the country.

Whilst clinging to the faint hope that the madness might cease, everyone prepares for the worst. Suitcases are packed and my father, using indelible ink on canvas, writes identity labels for each of us and sews them into the lining of our overcoats. What good this would have been, I do not now know but at least it was felt that something was being done.

Soon after, all people who had been eliminated from the economy became candidates for deportation. Onkel and Tante Sidon were wrenched out of their tranquil life and were included in the very early transports. I saw them walking down the courtyard carrying their little bundles. They looked up at our window as they passed and I saw their gaunt faces, a faint smile of resignation and a feeble good bye wave of the hand. Included in this transport were the well and the sick, the very old and the very young and even the unborn in their mothers' wombs. Hospitals were cleared out and people were put on the train on stretchers, without mercy or human pity. There was the strictest security around the railway station and we did not then know that the people were packed like sardines, 80 to the cattle truck.

¹ The Zionist anthem.

A month or two later. It is mid-day. The entrances to the Judengasse are sealed off by Hlinka guardists and German FS. We hear a commotion. Their hordes once again invade the buildings on the Judengasse. They are rounding up Jews who have no “*Schutzlegitimation*”¹. The Jews are easy enough to find: there is the list of Jewish residents in the entrance and there is the Yellow Star on their front door. Only my mother, Tante Hermina and I are at home. We tell Hermina to go into the outside toilet and remain there until it is all over. She refuses and instead hides in the kitchen and draws the floor-length curtain that partitions it from the entrance hall, behind her. There is a knock on the door. We show our identity papers which appear to satisfy them. They are on the way out when one of them draws back the curtain and sees Hermina. She has no protection and her name is added to their list. “Down at the front entrance in 10 minutes with your luggage” is the order. They pass by the door of the outside lavatory and don’t bother to look in. Such is fate. We are all distraught but Hermina seems quite calm. What does one pack in 10 minutes? A tearful leave taking and she walks down the stone staircase to the front of the building and we see no more of her. Erwin is very upset because he and Hermina did not always see eye to eye. He writes a letter to Hermina and hands it to Jonas Eckstein who later reports that he had delivered it. We were without an inkling of what was really happening in Poland. Without this knowledge there was still hope of a reunion with one’s dearest and nearest. We are all very downhearted but life goes on.

The family Weiss across the passage in the Judengasse was very religious. Mr. Weiss had a long unruly black beard and side-locks. His wife wore a wig as was prescribed by religion and they had many children as was also prescribed by religion: perhaps seven and all quite young. Mr. Weiss approached Erwin to ask if he could get him on the gang of workers who were to be taken on to extend and improve a railway track. The ministry that employed Erwin was in charge of the line improvement scheme and also of some 1000 houses to be erected in the outskirts of the town. Erwin spoke to his superior and managed to get Mr. Weiss taken on. I saw Mr. Weiss the first morning that he started work. He had cut off his side-locks and shaved off his beard. I would not have recognised him had I met him in the street. Poor man, it must have cost him a great deal of agonising emotional struggle. At about the same time Papa started working on the building site as a plumber. He was in his element: he did something creative and I cannot remember him more content.

Some months later, there was a rumour that the authorities planned to cancel the work certificates of those working on the railway line and on the building site. I think that I got the information through Hansi Abeles whose father was a committee member of the ÚŽ. Papa stayed off work the next day and made himself scarce. We told Mr. Weiss of the rumour but he decided to go to work the next morning and not believe the hearsay.

Next day, Friday morning, as the Jews were at their work, most quite unsuspecting, they were rounded up and immediately assembled ready to be concentrated in a collecting camp. Simultaneously, the police went to their addresses to pick up their families and ready them for deportation. I was at

¹ German: Document of protection. A yellow two paged identity document.

school and knew nothing of this. In the afternoon, Ernst called at the school. Ernst was about 20, tall, blond and blue eyed a supposedly typical example of the Nordic race - only he was a Jew from Klagenfurt in Austria. He belonged to the Zionist movement. I was not to go home. The police were rounding up people in our building. Mamma had suddenly taken ill and had to be taken to hospital. Ernst took me for a walk and we sat in a small park outside the Old Town Hall to wait for news of developments. That night I could not go home and stayed at Ernst's parents apartment but so that the neighbours would not see me enter the house we sat in the park until it was quite dark. Next day, the news was bad. I heard that when the guardists entered our apartment and ordered my mother to pack, she was so shocked that she suffered a stroke. The guardist decided to put her in the transport on a stretcher. The doctor in charge, Dr. Aich, a Gentile, of the Protestant hospital, attested that Mamma was incapable of being transported. Miracle of miracles! The tormentors were persuaded to leave her behind. She was transferred to the sick room of a building, formerly the Jewish old age home, which the Hlinka guard used for the short-term concentration of Jewish detainees. The Weiss family were not so fortunate.

Natzi is amongst the last young Jewish men conscripted for military service. They were no longer trained in weaponry but were used as sappers. They were employed for digging trenches required for a drainage and canalisation project north of Bratislava. He is not at home. Erwin is the only one in the family who is able to move. He has the *Schutzlegitimation*. Papa is hiding with a gentile family at his place of work and Renka is placed in care of a young woman, the girl friend of a draughtsman who works with Erwin. I am found a hiding place at a German woman's apartment who hides Jews for the money. There I find two middle aged couples in a similar predicament. We are kept out of sight, with curtains drawn. We sit all day staring at one another. There is no contact with the world outside but Ernst comes once to see how I am getting on but he has no news. I return home after a few days but I am not allowed to visit my mother in hospital. When Mamma returns after some weeks, one side of her face has dropped and she has little movement in her arm on the same side. Fortunately, the movement returns after some time but her face remains very slightly lopsided.

From March 1942 until October of that year there was an unstoppable succession of deportations that wrenched people from their home, wrest families asunder, wrought havoc with their lives and assigned them to an unknown cruel fate. That year, after the first wave of deportations had stopped, 60,000 Jews had been forcibly deported to what the authorities by then knew, was certain death. Of the first waves of deportees only a handful returned and of those, most were physical and mental wrecks. After the 1942 deportations and after allowing for the few who managed to escape, there remained in the country about 25,000 Jews out of the original 90,000.

Most members of the committee of the ÚŽ were unhappy with Sebestyén's "yes Sir, no Sir" attitude. The refusal to countenance any defensive action which was not strictly according to the law prompted the Committee to intrigue against him. They achieved his removal from the post of starosta and the Committee persuaded the head of the 14th department of the ministry

which dealt with Jewish affairs, to appoint Dr. Oskar Neumann to the post. This gentleman was no other than Margalit's father. He was married to a gentile woman who had converted to Judaism.

In an attempt to stop further deportations the Committee conceived the idea of bribery on a grand scale. The Slovaks were known to be willing helpers in "ridding themselves of the Jews" but were seen as only nominally in charge of the deportations or of the rate at which these were accomplished. Any bribe to be effective had to be enormous and had to be paid direct to the German in charge. That man was von Wisliceny. The members of the committee contrived a stratagem whereby this SS-man accepted \$40,000, reputedly sent from Switzerland with the request that further deportations should cease.¹ This, in present day value must be equivalent to at least half million dollars. Wisliceny accepted the bribe and further deportations stopped. Despite the constant official statements made by the unholy trinity of Tiso, Tuka and Mach that the deportations would be restarted, Wisliceny kept to his side of the bargain and not until the late autumn of 1944 when the Germans occupied Slovakia in order to put down the partisan uprising, were Jews of Slovakia again deported. This was a tremendous achievement. The delay saved the lives of many people who would otherwise have perished. I am certain that I am one of those.

The tide of war turned in 1943. In February, von Paulus, the field-marshal in command of the German armies at Stalingrad, surrenders. In June, the Anglo-American invasion of Italy takes place. In July, il Duce is deposed and Badoglio sues for peace. There is jubilation in our hearts - there is hope that the war will soon be over. Once again our celebrations are premature. The Allies are slow and the Germans occupy most of northern and central Italy, rescue Mussolini and put up stubborn resistance to an Allied advance. The hard core apart, many Slovaks too, now sense that Germany may not win the war; others now openly admit of the possibility that Hitler will lose it. They are now looking for alibis. In the hilly and forested parts of eastern Slovakia small bands of partisans start blowing up railway tracks and bridges and with the approaching eastern front, sabotage increases. This is only obliquely reported by the press who demand action especially against the Jews.

Towards the end of 1943 there is talk of a children's transport overland to Istanbul and from there to Palestine. Certificates to enter Palestine to be allocated by the Jewish Agency in Turkey. Margalit and Hansi are included in the transport but not I. Hansi refuses to go unless I go also. His father manages to have my name included on the list. My parents do not object to my leaving and start putting things to one side ready for packing. Wisliceny is promised hard currency for every child allowed to leave the country. He raises no objection but refers the matter to Berlin. When final arrangements are nearly complete, Wisliceny informs the committee that Haj Amin al-Husseini, the Mufti of Jerusalem², who had moved to Berlin to support Germany against the Allies, objects to the children being allowed to go to Palestine. Wisliceny informs the committee that the children would be permitted to leave if a

¹ Lord Russell of Liverpool, *The Trial of Adolf Eichmann*, William Heinemann (1962)

² The spiritual head of Palestinian Muslims.

different destination can be found. But, there is nowhere else to go and the transport does not materialise.

Members of the committee of the ÚŽ lived a precarious life and were often arrested either by the Slovak police or by the German authorities. Hansi's father suffered such a trauma when Adolf Eichmann had him arrested, put in a cage and left on the platform of a railway station with the instructions to have him deported. After much intervention he was released. Many years later when Eichmann stood trial in Jerusalem for his crimes, Hansi's father gave evidence against him. But being a committee member of the ÚŽ he was privy to much inside information some of which he discussed with his family. Hansi told me of many things in the strictest confidence. I heard of schemes and intrigues, of bribes paid to venal Slovaks apparatchiks, to the small fry and to the big fish. He told me that there was talk that the Germans had cleared out patients from mental institutions and killed them with lethal injections. I laughed at this. Not possible I said, it must be propaganda. People do not go about killing innocent people, not even the Germans. On one specific occasion Hansi told me of two Jewish young men from Slovakia¹ who had been deported to a place in Poland called Auschwitz. They had managed to escape and made their way back home. They told of the mass murder of Jews. But of course I did not believe that either.

During the period between the end of the first phase of deportations and the beginning of the final expatriation, Hansi and I tasted all the forbidden fruits that the rest of the population was free to enjoy. Our first attempts were very tentative as if to see what we could get away with. We attended cinema performances, we went to see opera, we listened to concerts, we went swimming. I even had the nerve to enrol for ball room dancing. I paid my fee for the course of lessons using my Sýkora identity. During the interval of the first lesson a German youth started asking rather pointed questions; I thought better of it and did not turn up for the second lesson forfeiting the course fees. We established acquaintanceships with a Hungarian non-Jew of roughly our own age without giving away our real identities.

As the theatres of war approach one sees the vapour trails of the silver birds, high in the clear blue summer sky. The sirens sound the alarm but, at first, the planes overfly Bratislava. Once or twice the sirens sound at lunch break and I go up on to the flat roof of the tall building that is being constructed on the site. I look heavenwards and feast my eyes. I have no conscious fear but my knees shake uncontrollably. Things float down and fall to the ground not far from me. They look like bits of silver paper. After the all-clear I approach them with a great deal of caution but dare not touch them. They turn out to be quite harmless; they were jettisoned by the planes to confuse the anti-aircraft radar. Before many weeks, the silver birds jettison bombs and in the far distance I see the black plumes rising from the burning oil refinery by the banks of the Danube. Odd sensations grip me. An emotional welcome to airmen who have come to bomb my town. Bombs cannot see yellow stars and at last one takes an equal chance with the rest of the population. As if to prove

¹ Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler

my sentiments, a bomb falls on a public shelter across the road from Erwin's office and amongst the dead is a Jewish man.

Political development accelerated at an alarming pace. In the spring of 1944 Germany marched into Hungary. The Jews of Ruthenia, a province annexed by Hungary in 1938, are deported to Auschwitz.

It is now June 1944 and the Allies land in Normandy. The long awaited second front is set in motion. After a slow start, the Allies advance towards the German border liberating France, Belgium, Holland and Denmark on the way. The war seems nearly finished. In July 1944 my parents celebrate their 25th wedding anniversary and Soviet forces reach the borders of Slovakia. Just hold out a little longer, it must end soon. Even the most hard bitten nazi must realise that Germany cannot now win the war but Hitler speaks of *Vergeltungswaffen*¹. There is an unsuccessful attempt on Hitler's life. Dear God, why did you not make him stand 6 inches nearer to the bomb? Must the bitter cup be drained to the last drop? You are an unforgiving God!

At this point, a considerable part of the Slovak military establishment in central Slovakia change allegiance and go over to the partisans. The eastern and central parts of Slovakia are declared liberated Czechoslovakia. The military are joined by some of the gendarmerie. The gates of the forced labour camps are thrown open and some internees join the partisans. Avri makes his way home to Bratislava and stays for a short while. Soon after he goes underground on false papers and finds a job in Trnava, a small town north of Bratislava. He uses Andrej Sýkora as his name.

The remainder of the Slovak army that stays loyal to Tiso and his clique make no progress against the partisans. At the end of August, Tiso, the puppet ally, is "encouraged" by the Germans to request help to clear out the "bandits". The Germans have not far to come. They cross the Danube bridge at Bratislava. I see them arrive. Column upon column of tanks and personnel carriers. With the army comes the SS and the Gestapo. But the Russians, for their own reasons, stay put and make no attempt to cross the borders to join up with the partisans to give them succour. Who knows why?

Soon after, there are rumours that the SS are rounding up Jews of provincial towns; they are put into the lately vacated forced labour camps which they turn into a concentration camps. We hear that Wisliceny has been replaced by Hauptsturmführer Brunner, an SS man of ill repute. He recognises no difference between Jew and recently baptised Christian. Every *Schutzlegitimation* becomes null and void. There are disturbing rumours that Jews found in rebel territory are hanged or shot out of hand².

The date is the 28th September 1944. A few days ago we celebrated Papa's 55th birthday. All but Avri are at home. There are no rumours in the air; we go to bed peacefully feeling quite secure with the documents of protection. I lie in bed reading a thriller. It is getting very late but I cannot put down the book waiting for the resolution. We all sleep in one room and Mamma tells me to

¹ German: Weapons of revenge. They were known in Britain as the V1 and V2.

² Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust*, Fontana Press (1987), p.727

turn off the light because it disturbs the others. I close the book with great reluctance and put it on the window sill above my bed, switch off the light and go to sleep.

Suddenly, a banging on the door. “*Aufmachen! Schnell! Schnell!*”¹. We wake with a start. I look at my watch. It is midnight. I could not have been asleep very long. We open the door. There, a German soldier with his gun at the ready. He barks his order. “Ten minutes! dressed and packed in the yard! Take all money, gold and valuables.” We try and show him our *Schutzlegitimation*. He gestures dismissively. All protection is invalid with immediate effect. We are stunned. And then, there is absolute panic. What first? We dress without thought. We get in each others way. We manage to fill a suitcase between the six of us. We go to the front door; I look back at the room that was home a few minutes before. The beds unmade, wardrobe doors wide open, everything higgledy-piggledy and my thriller on the window sill unfinished. We lock the front door and go into the yard where other families have already gathered. Hardly anyone speaks. Everyone appears depressed and, like I, must surely wonder what was in store for us. There are armed SS and guardists at the front gate. After a time, we are ordered to move into the street. Other groups emerge from other buildings of the Judengasse. We are made to form a long column and are marched off, guarded by heavily armed men on both sides. I think that we would be taken to the railway station but after a short distance we stop at the ÚŽ building not far away.

It is still dark. The doors of the building are wide open: the entrance that appeared quite innocuous yesterday seems now like the wide gaping mouth of a voracious beast that is about to devour all. The rooms are lit. Accompanied by shouts, threats and sharp orders, the mass of human beings, all with their little bundles, are shoved and pushed and driven into the house. “*Nun wird es schon? Fertig machen! Du Judensau!*”² We mill into the building and approach a staircase. On the landing at the top of the staircase, an uniformed German behind a desk. I hear people in front giving their names and I see the German writing. A few people ahead of me a vaguely familiar face of a middle aged man awaits his turn. He gives his name. “Herr Primarius Julius Oestreicher”. The German at the desk barks back at him in the local dialect: “*Hier gibt’s keine Primariuse. Hier bist’t Jud Israel Oestreicher. Hau ab!*”³ How are the mighty fallen.

We move on into the rooms only yesterday used as offices. The rooms get fuller and fuller. It gets hotter and hotter. Babies scream, children cry, there are outbursts of desperation.

I see Margalit’s father. Margalit, her brother and mother had left Bratislava for the countryside to live in the small village where her mother was born. I cannot find Hansi and his family. His father must have had prior information

¹ German: Open up! On the double!

² German: Get going! Get done! You Jewish sow!

³ German: There are no "primariuses" here. Here you are Jew Israel Oestreicher. Scram!". The German uses the second person singular which is an added insult.

and they have gone underground “*verbunkert*”¹. I am happy that he is not in the mousetrap. The older people sit on suitcases, the younger people stand about aimlessly. We spend restless hours wondering what they are going to do with us. There is a great depression, a feeling of doom and foreboding.

As morning light breaks: “*Alles antreten mit Gepäck!*”² Outside, in front of the doors, a column starts to form. Slowly the sad procession is set in motion. Very soon it becomes like an endless chain of yellow stars snaking its way through the chilly early autumn morning. The walking column of unresisting Jews, men, women and children, is flanked on both sides by a cordon of armed men, some SS, some guardist, some old Home-guard and even the Hitler Youth has been mobilised for this “heroic” action. The procession slowly winds its way through the streets, past the International Red Cross building, past the residence of his Eminence the Papal Nuncio. But no one calls out: “Stop! Stop this Madness!” We walk on, past the grammar school with boys looking out of the windows, some jeering. Just as I come abreast of one window the procession halts and I see my Hungarian acquaintance of a few months ago - he recognises me and I avert my gaze. We walk on, past the residence of his Excellency the President, Father Tiso. I wonder whether he glances through a chink in the curtains and sees the pathetic train of his subjects, stopping from time to time, like Jesus on his way to Golgotha: can he not see the parallel? “*Inasmuch as ye have done it to the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.*”³ If Jesus the Jew were here he would be walking with us. He is crucifying him again and again and again, ninety-thousand times. But Tiso, like the Pharisee that he rants and rails against in his sermons, looks the other way. On we walk, apathetically, with eyes cast down like criminals, ashamed, past the staring masses now going about their business. But it is they who should lower their heads in shame and we who should be walking with heads held high. They are the criminals not we. But on that cool morning I do not yet see it that way. On and on we trudge until we reach the suburban railway terminus. There we stop. On the track I see a number of goods trucks.

It is now afternoon. We have had neither food nor water since the previous night. But there is no respite. Roaring orders: “*Alles einsteigen!*”⁴ The door of the truck is too high off the platform, there is no ramp. We mount or climb into the wagons 70-80 people to the truck. The doors are slammed shut and bolted. We hear voices outside but nothing happens. We remain cooped up until dark. There is no water to drink. We want to relieve ourselves but the only toilet facility is one bucket in the corner for both men and women.

At last we hear a whistle blow and the wheels start turning. It is now nearly 9 p.m. It is a slow, long journey and we have no idea of our destination. The train stops and starts and crawls along. At 2 a.m., the 30th September, on a

¹ German: Inside a bunker implying being hidden from public view i.e. going to ground in a hide-out.

² German: All to attend with luggage. There is more than a subtle difference in the use of the word “alles” rather than “alle”. The latter applies to people and the former to inanimate objects.

³ Matthew 25:40

⁴ German: All aboard! (note: the constant use of “alles”)

Sabbath morning, the train stops. We have now suffered this unremitting trauma for 26 hours. Somebody looks out of a small ventilating window and reports that the station plate reads Sered. A place one hour's train journey distant from Bratislava has taken five hours to reach.

With a grating noise the sliding doors of the cattle trucks part. On the platform we see SS guards, some with horse whips in their hands, some with automatics, finger on the trigger. Shrill bellowing orders pierce my ears. "*Alles 'raus. Schnell! Tempo!*"¹ And he who is slow feels the butt of a gun or the leather thong of the whip. We are marched into the central square of the camp and are made to form into military ranks three deep. A SS man walks along the rank and counts our number. He reports this to his superior and refers to us as "*Stück*" (items, pieces of luggage) rather than persons. Another shrill command - we are ordered into a large, empty room.

We are too wrought up to doze even for a minute. We rest awhile sitting on the floor. In the corner of the room some people pray. I remember today is Succoth.² Five days ago it was Yom Kippur the day when God looks at the ledger he keeps for all people, sits in judgement and writes in The Book who shall live and who shall die. On this day, Jews wish each other that "their name may be written in the book of life". We do not know this yet but this year as in the past three years God will have been busy writing names in the book of death.

At 6 a.m. the next morning an SS man pushes open the door. He bellows: "*Alles sofort zur Gepäckkontrolle.*"³ We move out of the room as quickly as we can, carrying our luggage. We are again made to stand in rows. We stand and wait; nothing much happens. One hour passes by and then another. Is all this just to harass and plague us? A new group of people with their luggage exit from the building and form up on the opposite side of the square. We are now ordered back into the building, this time to occupy small rooms just vacated by the previous group; 20-25 to a room with furniture for four. It never occurs to me to ask what will happen to the previous occupants. Little do I know that most of these people have but a few hours to live. Nor do I know that in a few days time it will be our turn to follow them and to make room for the next batch. The philosophical thought occurs to me how we might have acted had we but known of the fate the Germans had prepared for us.

One day passes and then a second. Everyone seems to settle into the routine of doing nothing but wait and hope. Wait for what? no one knows. We hope for some permanence in our present condition much reduced that it is. We are ready to settle for anything at all as long as we are left alone. Man's capacity to adapt is boundless. But it is not to be. On the third morning, 3rd of October, we are ordered to line up in the central square with all our luggage. There is a table with a typewriter and a SS man sits behind it. We are ordered to approach the table in single file and give our name. This is typed into the machine. How methodical and meticulous these Germans are - no wonder one

¹ German: All out! Quick! On the double!

² Feast of the Tabernacles.

³ German: Everyone immediately for a luggage check.

speaks of “*deutsche Gründlichkeit*.”¹ We are ordered to hand over all money, jewellery and valuables. I hand over my watch.

We are counted then marched to the siding under armed guards and herded like cattle freight into the trucks. The first who enter move towards the edges of the truck and the rest just fit into the middle. The door slams shut, I hear the bolts engage and we are in the semi-dark. There are 85 human beings and their luggage confined in the truck. There is little room to move and one settles where one fits. Some sit on their luggage, some on their haunches, some crouch and some stand. There is no room for anyone to lie down. People, if they talk at all, speak in muted voices. There is a bucket for drinking water and a bucket for passing it. Women form a living curtain for others who have the need to use the bucket. Men are less fastidious.

I find myself next to Eva, a girl my own age, the daughter of one of my teachers. I share sitting on her suitcase. We only vaguely know each other and we talk banalities. All watches having been confiscated, nobody knows the time and it drags. The more it drags the greater the anxiety of where we are being taken and what awaits us.

Through the barred ventilating grill I notice that the light is fading and when it is quite dark the train moves out of the siding. On this journey there are fewer stops and starts than there were on the way to Sered. From time to time someone reports the passing of stations. We pass the central railway station at Bratislava. We have been travelling in a south-westerly direction. People doze off. There is little talking now. All are left with their own thoughts. Eva and I sit in the dark, side by side. Our hands touch accidentally. Neither withdraws the hand. We move closer and our bodies touch. We find reassurance and human comfort in this. Our lips meet, first fleetingly and then eagerly. We cling to each other in adolescent passion like two waifs.

The atmosphere in the truck is getting foul and it is unbearably hot. I hear some young people near the door talking. I cannot quite hear what they are saying but I can hear metal grating against metal. After some time I hear one say out aloud to try and slide back the door. The door opens and fresh cold night air permeates the wagon and wakens all with a start. The young people are intending to escape by jumping the transport when the train slows down. They invite others to join them. The old generation is alarmed at the precipitous action of these “hot heads”. They are against anyone jumping. If you escape, they argue, what is to become of us? We will be hostages to the Germans. They will shoot your parents for letting you escape. With hindsight, had we known what was awaiting us not many hours away, we all would have acted differently (or would we?). Ignorance was not bliss but it left room for hope. The young men are dissuaded from jumping. The tools they had stolen from the workshops in Sered are thrown out into the night. The doors are slid shut and darkness descends once again. All are now restless and apprehensive. Will the SS guards notice the broken bolts in the morning? Some may doze but not many sleep. If they do they must have very disturbed dreams.

¹ German: German thoroughness.

Morning dawns. It is the 4th of October. Natzi is 23 today. The family wish him a happy birthday. When the train stops we hear the German guards talking. They are inspecting the wagons. They pass ours: there is sudden commotion. I hear an agitated to-ing and fro-ing and then the doors are slid back, crash! and remain open. A SS man jumps aboard his automatic pointing at us. There is a head count; no-one is missing. "Who broke the bolt", asks he, threateningly pointing his gun. No-one answers. We are threatened with immediate mass execution if we do not tell him. Someone speaks up and points to a tall man in his early thirties who helped to slide back the doors but who did no drilling. The SS man focuses his attention on this person. He orders him to stand with his back against the open doorway. "Pick up your suitcase", he orders "now hands up!" The man lifts the suitcase up in to the air. "Bend your knees!" he commands. The man obeys. "Who helped you to break the bolt" demands the SS man pointing the automatic at the man. The man protests his innocence; he maintains that he was not involved. "If you don't tell me, you will be shot!" he threatens. The man's face is drained of all colour. With a trembling voice he claims that if he must die to be allowed to say his prayers. He does not wait for permission. "Our Father who art in heaven...": the victim had recently become a Christian. The scene is quite Kafkaesque. The SS guard leaves the man in this impossible position for what seemed an eternity. Whenever his arms flag or his knees give way, the SS man bellows at him. But somehow the tension has gone out of the situation and after some further minutes the SS man lets the man stand down; the man makes the sign of the cross and nearly collapses. The SS man now sits with his feet dangling out of the open doorway guarding us. In his own way he becomes less aggressive and keeps eyeing the young women. He asks Renka where she comes from. He speaks with a broad country accent and he is not easy to understand. Renka asks where we were going. I hear "*Ihr geht in die Wurstfabrik*"¹. I think that he is joking but I have a momentary vision of being minced into sausage meat. I have a cold foreboding of doom. I do not believe my ears and ask Renka what he said. She heard "*Ihr geht nach Osnabrück*"². With hindsight it was I who heard correctly.

Day turns uneventfully into night. The train grinds to a halt. It is the dead of night but bright lights penetrate through the ventilation grills and I hear loud voices outside. As the sounds approach I hear "'raus! 'raus!"³ and at the same time the doors on both sides of our wagon are slid open. Floodlights illuminate the scene: there are SS guards all around us. I see men in ill fitting blue and white striped prison uniform. On their head a shapeless beret similarly striped. One hears the clatter of the wooden clogs they wear. These men, I am later to learn, are the Kanada Kommando, the scavengers. The forward trucks have already disgorged their human cargo and the people are being urged with shouts and prodded with kicks to move along fast. Everyone is rushing about. There appears to be manic activity. The whole scene is one of confusion and madness, quite surrealistic. If the scene could have been observed from a distance it would have seemed like an animated Breughel painting: tortured faces and torturing devils. What is happening? One is given no time to think:

¹ German: You are going into the sausage factory.

² German: You are going to Osnabrück. (A town in Germany).

³ German: out! out!

one reacts mechanically to the mental stress and to the confusion that these monsters manage to induce in us, the new comers. Natzi, Erwin and I are near the door; Mamma, Papa and Renka are further back with the suitcase. I look out and notice that the train had stopped on a rail track without a raised platform. There is a long drop to the ground. We decide to get down first to help Mamma down. We jump down. Papa follows. We hardly touch ground when we are pushed along by the people in the striped uniforms. "Leave all luggage behind". "*Schnell, schnell, schnell*" and to reinforce this haste, people are booted and butted. I observe that there are only men on our side of the track. We are pushed along by the force of the people behind us. There is no turning back to take leave. We shout out "goodbye, Mamma", "goodbye, Renka". In the general tumult and noise I doubt that they can hear us. We are pushed farther and farther away from the train. We are ordered to form a single file and to keep moving. The four of us stay together. There are quite a few people in front of us but we can see an SS man on a slightly raised platform. We later learn that it was the infamous Dr. Mengele, the sadist doctor who conducted medical experiments on prisoners. I look around to see if I can catch a glimpse of Mamma and Renka but the women are nowhere to be seen. It will turn out that we shall never see them again. As we move nearer to the head of the queue I can see people move either to the left or to the right. It is unmistakable that the old and the very young are sent to the left. Although we do not know this yet, Mengele is acting as God and with the silent flick of his finger he writes names in the book of life or in the book of death. As I come within earshot I hear people stating their ages and occupations. It is now our turn. I forget in what order we approached "the angel of death". We grasp the situation very quickly and react accordingly. Natzi becomes a locksmith, Erwin a builder, I make myself two years older and am an electrician. Papa, with much presence of mind, is suddenly ten years younger and a plumber. We are lucky. For each one of us the finger gestures to the right. An unheaved sigh of relief is felt when we find ourselves still together. We are to see another day.

We are marched to a building. There are about 30 or 40 of us who enter a large, unheated room. We are ordered to strip and to leave our clothes in a neat heap on the floor. We all stand stark naked. I feel slightly embarrassed by my father's nakedness. I shiver as much from the cold as from fear of the uncertain and stand and wait for the next act. After what seems a long time a SS officer enters and inspects us. He asks: "is there anyone who has a weak heart or hernia and would like to be assigned for light work?" One person raises his hand. The SS officer orders him to stand to one side and orders the rest to enter another room. We did not then know that the poor man who hoped to lighten his load had sentenced himself to death.

The room which we enter has many shower heads in the ceiling. There are water pipes running along the walls and I manage to stand next to one but it is too hot to touch. Another long wait and then the shower heads discharge a trickle of warm water. The water has a soporific effect and I feel less tense. There is no soap. As suddenly as the water came flowing, it stops. There are no towels. We are ordered out of the shower room and moved into another room where prisoners with hair clippers await us. Within a few minutes we stand like shorn sheep or should that be sacrificial lambs. We are moved along

and as we pass a door, a prisoner acting as quartermaster hands us some clothing. It is not our own. A shirt, underpants, a striped prison jacket, trousers and beret. I forget what we were given to wear next to our feet but I clearly remember the wooden clogs. We throw on the old and not too clean rags which help to dry our wet bodies. Some find the trousers too large and some too small. All the time the barking commands of a SS guard encourages one to be quick. We don our berets and put on our feet the wooden clogs. They are hard to the feet: flat feet is not going to be one of our problems. We are ordered to form a marching column, two abreast, and are led towards a gate. As the column nears the gate I hear the order "*Mützen ab!*"¹ Instinctively I reach for my beret and remove it. The entrance is well lit and I notice a large arch above the gate. On it, in large wrought iron letters: *Arbeit macht frei.*² There is a moment of elation in my heart at seeing this; it must be a labour camp. Who would not cling to such a straw. WE are not afraid to work. We enter the camp through this gate. Dante's vision of the writing over the gates of hell "leave all hope ye who enter here" would have been a more appropriate adage. We all shall experience hell on earth. It has taken a week from home to hell, from bed to bedlam.

¹ German: Caps off!

² German: Work liberates.

HOLOCAUST.

Auschwitz-Birkenau.

We enter KZ¹ Auschwitz. I do not remember when and how I found out where we were; it must have been within the first few hours of our incarceration. There was the vague recollection of having heard that name before but it did not, at first, register. I soon learnt that Auschwitz had a few sub-camps and that we were held at Birkenau; more specifically in the Zigeunerlager². I am not sure why the camp was referred to as the “gypsy camp”; perhaps because it had no permanent population, it was a transit camp. Its residents were transient, like gypsies. From here people were sent either to the gas chambers or else to KZs attached to mines or factories where prisoners were made to slave. There is the other possibility that gypsies were assembled in this camp by the nazis prior to their extermination.

The war is going badly for Germany. The Wehrmacht is getting short of soldiers and they are calling up for military service the young and the old, the infirm and the unfit: they start to scrape the bottom of the barrel. The labour force needed to maintain the war effort, is shrinking. The nazis decide to kill two birds with one stone: their strategy, to use able bodied Jews as slave labour in their mines and factories, to keep them alive on starvation rations; when their strength declines, to gas them and replace them with a new, fresh input of Jews and thus, ad infinitum, until all the Jews are exterminated and Germany has won the war. If one can speak of good fortune in this context, we owe our survival to the fact that we were not deported until October 1944 when this strategy was in force. It was also fortunate that my near total exhaustion coincided with a Russian push westward which was in full swing by mid January 1945. By the end of January the war in Europe has nearly another four months to run its course but I am free again.

We file into the Zigeunerlager through a large, open framed double gate spiked and bristling with barbed wire. It is a black, starless night. We four walk side by side. I also notice Eva’s brother and young Jiří Fürchtgott, the son of a neighbour from the Schreibergasse. He is only 15. He keeps close to us, we are his only contact. His father does not appear to have made it into the camp.³ There is also Abonyi, Erwin’s school friend. By the flood lights installed at intervals along the barbed wire perimeter fence I see a further similar fence some feet beyond. The perimeter is surrounded by several tall watch towers playing search lights in all directions. One can clearly discern a number of parallel huts on either side of a dirt camp road. They are long, single storied buildings separated by a space roughly their own width. We halt

¹ German: Pronounced "kah-tset". It is an abbreviation for Konzentrationslager - concentration camp.

² German: Gypsy camp.

³ His father was an architect and taught on Erwin’s retraining course. Apart from his sister Viera, who was fortunate to be picked by Count Bernadotte from amongst the girls in Ravensbrück and taken to Sweden, none of the family survived the Holocaust. They had lived for some years in Palestine but could not find a suitable niche there. They returned to Czechoslovakia shortly before its break-up. What an irony of fate!

in front of a hut marked as Block 13. They obviously do not bother about unlucky numbers, all number are equally unlucky here.

We are herded into the hut with threats and shouts and kicks. The block is a very long, practically windowless brick built structure with a concrete floor. Iron rings for tethering horses are set into the brickwork. I found out later that the barracks were originally used by the Polish army for stabling horses. There are a few naked electric bulbs hanging from the ceiling, lighting the scene. Near the entrance and to one side there is a door. This, it turned out, leads to a room in which the *Blockälteste*¹ lives in what, by KZ standards, is palatial comfort. The huge interior of the barrack room is completely empty - a gaping expanse of space that is about to devour us. There are no bunks, no tables, no chairs. At the back of the room there is a small area in which the latrine is placed. Strict orders are given that we are not allowed to leave the block at night and whoever does, would be shot on sight. We are each issued with a blanket and told to lie on the floor to sleep. Abonyi suggests that he and I should share our blankets so that we could use one to soften the concrete and the other to cover us. I am exhausted, hungry, confused and uncertain of what is happening. Despite the hardness of the floor and the lights that remain alight during the night, I drop off to sleep almost at once.

The sound of the morning gong wakes me with a start. The time is 5 am. It is the 5th of October. My first full day in Auschwitz is about to start. We had slept in what we stood so we need not dress. There is nowhere to wash. We are told to fold our blankets neatly and stack them on the floor. We hear the first order of the day. *Appell!* Roll-call! Like a flock of sheep herded by a sheep dog, we file out of the hut, unprotesting and as quick as we can. We are learning fast: never delay for a single second if you want to avoid being kicked. It is a dark, cold October morning and we are made to line up in the open space between the barracks, in rows of three or four.

I am referred to as *Häftling*². The resident detainees wear a number and a colour triangle on the left of their chest. There appear to be four categories of detainees and each is identified by the colour of the triangle: convicted criminals have green, political prisoners red, homosexuals yellow and Jews red and yellow triangles combined in the shape of the star of David. The convicts are Germans from the Reich usually reprieved murderers and hardened criminals. The politicals are communists, trade unionists, socialists, Jehovah's witnesses, priests and pastors. Our *Blockälteste* wears a red triangle. He is a Polish Catholic priest.

After a time, a SS man arrives. A *kapo*³ gives the order "*Achtung! Mützen ab!*" Bareheaded we stand to attention. The SS man counts the number of files pointing to each as he passes along the line of men. The SS have a mania for counting their prisoners as if there were some real chance of somebody ever

¹ German: Barrack elder. A prisoner in charge of the barrack.

² German: Detainee.

³ A prisoner in charge of others. It has been suggested that its possible origin stems from the Italian word "head". I believe that a more likely origin is the acronym K.Po. (Kah-po) for Konzentrationslager Polizei which is analogous to Geheime Staatspolizei (G.Sta.Po - Gestapo) or Schupo for Schutzpolizei.

escaping. It may have been just so much bull to torment us mentally, to harass us physically, to give us little respite: by any other name it amounts to torture. The SS man satisfies himself that none had escaped in the middle of the night. He writes on his note pad, departs and the parade is dismissed.

Two prisoners carrying a large cauldron arrive. We queue up for our first breakfast. It consists of a pat of margarine and a small portion of bread as black as ever I saw. The most memorable thing about this bread is the quantity of saw dust that it contains. We shall not be short of “fibre” in the diet. With the bread comes a mugful of black ersatz coffee made, as I later learn, of acorns. The “coffee” is warm and it warms my insides. We eat our food standing up. We are given no knives; we break open the bread, place the pat of margarine inside it and gulp it down. By now we are all very hungry.

We are not allowed back into the hut. We mill around restlessly in the cold: the space between the two barracks our universe. Our thin clothing is no protection against the cold morning of the early autumn. Unsuccessfully we try and keep warm. We rub our hands together, we place them under the armpits, we flay our arms over our shoulders, we stamp our feet. In an attempt to reduce the heat loss a group of people crowd together forming a solid circle. After a while those inside the circle change places with those at the periphery. Innocently, we call this “going into the oven”.

With nothing to do, time drags. One takes stock of the situation; the inventory is brief, the shelves are empty. Everyone is subdued. It is the uncertainty that is depressing. Is it only a week since I slept in my own bed? It seems like it never was. One talks of home, of wives, of children and parents and friends. One feels hungry but still lives on one’s fat resources and energy is plentiful. Real hunger and starvation are yet to be experienced. One does not yet dream of meals enjoyed. Smokers find the lack of cigarettes hard to bear. One chap finds some scrap paper, obtains dried leaves of some sort, rolls a cigarette and tries to light up. The “herbal” cigarette does not want to light but in the attempt he manages to take a puff or two of smoke. Everyone is in need of a shave but it shows worse in the middle aged. Someone has a safety razor blade and offers a “dry” shave to anyone prepared to pay for it with a slice of bread. There are no takers.

Across the perimeter fence a woman in prison gear appears: we recognise her. She is Miss Redlinger who worked at Rujda the kosher butcher and delicatessen shop on the Kaputzinergasse. She left with the first batch of deportees back in 1942. A good sign, I feel: perhaps my fear is unjustified. She calls across “is there anyone from Bratislava?” We reply. She asks whether a certain person was amongst us. We ask whether she had seen Mamma and Renka and are they both safe. We say no. She, very convincingly lies and tells us that they are well. We request her to tell them that she had seen all four of us. Yes, she would do that and walks away. We feel relieved, hope wells in the heart. The capacity of the human mind at self deception is astounding: yet, it helped to live through the horror and to emerge the other side of the nightmare, mentally intact.

I take a look at my new environment. It is bleak, colourless, desolate. There is no grass, there are no flowers, no trees, no bushes; not even the weeds dare show their heads. There is nothing that the eye can feast on; all is monotone grey, a friendless, drab sight of hell. Staring me in the eyes is a notice hung on the wire: *Vorsicht! Hochspannung! Lebensgefahr!*¹ As if to re-enforce this message for those who do not understand, there is the sign of the skull and cross bones and a fading red zigzag symbol that represents lightening. The sign speaks for itself - the perimeter wire is electrified. We are prohibited from approaching the wire perimeter. Several barbed wire enclosures away, I notice two tall, square based brick chimneys. My first thought, they belonged to the factories where we shall be working. The chimneys emit smoke and an acrid smell of burning fat. There is a sudden realization: the spectre of Hansi's stories of mass murder torments my mind. The smoke clouds which pollute the air, now become a constant reminder of the fate to be expected.

I do not yet realise the limitation imposed on our movement and I walk down the camp road feeling a need to explore my environment further. A few blocks along, I see three inmates approach. I smile as one would, meeting people in a strange place. Their faces stare grimly back at me. I am completely non-plussed by this; do we not all endure the same miserable condition? I stop for a brief moment. Unprovoked, they set on me hitting out. Perhaps my smile was the provocation; perhaps they were instructed to do this; perhaps they were vicious just for the sake of it; perhaps they were taking out their own frustration on others, perhaps...who knows! I run back to my "universe" with much haste. I shall not attempt to leave my "safe haven" again. I had learnt an early lesson: we are all in the same boat but it is everyman for himself.

Everything is *verboten* - no reason why - it just is the basic law of the KZ. If in doubt - don't. There are certain rules one must learn to survive. They must be learnt quickly. Here there are only the quick or the dead. When meeting an SS man one must come to an instant halt, stand to attention and remove the beret in salute using one's right hand. He, of course, ignores one and passes by as if one did not exist. But the same fiend would flay one alive if one did not proceed in the correct manner and used one's left hand instead. When addressed, one stands to attention. One never disputes, argues or asks questions. One obeys orders. One must always answer "*Jawohl*" never "*Ja*"². All orders and actions seem intended to harass, to annoy, to abuse, to mistreat, to torment, to oppress, to mentally torture, to persecute. In short, to cause us pain, to break our spirit, to knock us into unresisting submission.

Sometime near mid day two prisoners arrive with a vat and again we queue up for our food. One prisoner dips a ladle into the vat and pours its contents into a tin dish held by the second who hands it to the next person in the queue. It is a thin red liquid with bits of beetroot floating in it. It is extremely scanty nourishment. It looks inedible. It tastes revolting. I am too faddy. It is my first meal but I cannot eat it and I say so aloud. There are quite a few takers willing to take it off me. Most unwillingly I slurp it down and nearly vomit. I notice that the soup thickens as more and more is taken from the vat. Weeks later when I have more experience and greater hunger, I shall know where to stand in the

¹ German: Caution! High tension! Peril to life!

² German: "Yes, sir" never "yes".

queue to benefit from this observation. After the “meal” the spoons and bowls are collected and counted. The evening meal is rather like breakfast but with a little extra bread.

The following day turns out to be eventful. Sometime, mid morning, a kapo shouts “*Antreten!*”¹ We rush to form the prescribed rows and files. We were counted a few hours earlier and I wonder why they want to count us again. A word passes down the line, “*Selektion*”. This is not a common German word and, for a moment, I am baffled but then I recognise its Latin root. It appears that the SS want to check on who had slipped through the net on arrival. Papa’s gaunt, drawn, unshaven face shows a grey and black stubble that makes him look much older. Jiři and Papa and I stand in the second row hoping that this would make us less noticeable. Natzı, Erwin and Abonyi stand immediately in front of us. Jiři puffs out his cheeks thinking that this will make him look older; Papa puffs out his chest thinking that it will make him look younger.

A SS man arrives. Arrogantly he strides down the line, fleetingly he looks at a face, points to this man and that. Those selected must gather opposite us by the wall of the block; there kapos guard them. They are the old and the young. There is gloom in their faces. One person tries to smuggle himself back to our side but he is spotted by a kapo who kicks him back into place. I hear somebody somewhere whisper to his neighbour “*füstbe menek*”². The SS man goes past Jiři but points to Papa and pulls him out of the rank. Papa’s face says it all. Our hearts sink. Soon after, the selection is completed; within a few minutes the fate of many people has been sealed. Those selected are made to march off but we remain on parade and are not allowed to move. Papa looks back, his eyes moist. He knows and we know that this is a final farewell: we know that we shall not see him again. As they move out of sight at the corner of the hut, I take a last look. I want to remember the scene of seeing Papa for the last time alive. I am intent on burning this image into my memory.

Those that remain are now ordered back into the hut. We are devastated. Two days ago we were a complete family; there are now only three of us left. Erwin and Natzı decide to see the *Blockälteste* in his room to try to intercede with him on Papa’s behalf. They will not let me come with them. After what seems an interminably long time but was, I am sure, no more than a few minutes, they come out. I ask but am not told what took place. When I recently asked Erwin about this incident he remembered telling the *Blockälteste* that we were three brothers and father and could he help to reunite us. The *Blockälteste* reassured them that Papa was being sent to a sanatorium because he is elderly. They told him that Papa would much rather stay with us and begged him to help if he could. I see the *Blockälteste* leave our barrack and after a few minutes return with Papa at his side. A veritable resurrection: Papa has returned from the dead. There is great rejoicing and much hugging. Erwin and Natzı thank the *Blockälteste* but he would have none of it. A decent human being even in a hellish place like the Birkenau *Vernichtungslager*³. Papa relates: “we were marched to block 25 and locked

¹ German: Fall in!

² Hungarian: They are going to go up in smoke.

³ German: Extermination camp.

in.” They are isolated in the *Selektionsblock*, the departure lounge for those departing this life via the gas chamber and chimney. “We were in line waiting to give our names and a kapo sat at a desk writing the list.” The Germans being a methodical lot, need a record of names even when people are readied for extermination. Papa continues: “The *Blockälteste* calls my name through a window and beckons me to stand to one side. He then speaks to the kapo at the desk. Fortunately my name was not yet recorded and I am let out through a back door.” It was a close shave. Next day Papa invests a slice of bread to get rid of his stubble. Using some water to wet Papa’s beard the “barber” takes the dull blade between his fingers and proceeds to shave him. It is a painful operation. I see Papa flinch. The job is done but as one says in yiddish “a close shave it wasn’t”. One feels that some action had been taken to improve one’s chance to stay alive another day.

One morning I hear that the father of a girl with whom I went to school had committed suicide. He had run against the electrified perimeter fence. I remember how close he and his daughter were. They always walked together, arms linked. I had seen him the previous day; he seemed very down. He was bemoaning the fate of his family and the uncertainty of what had become of them. In a moment of desperation he must have lost the will to survive. The way things are, we all are depressed for the same reason but everyone strives to survive another day and this man’s fate is soon forgotten.

I, in common with others, develop a strategy for survival: bend with the wind, no resistance only unquestioning compliance; inertia, do as little as you can, nothing if possible. The lessons taught me as a child come in useful: do not stand out, do not draw attention to yourself, be one face in a sea of faces. Above all, have the will power to endure! There is, in all of us, the tenacious will in the mind, the precarious hope in the heart, to outlast and to survive all things however difficult. I hold on to this desperate hope, on reflection, to the pathetic belief, hoping against all logic that all will end well; and thus the eternal optimism of the human spirit prevails.

The incongruity in this camp is startling. On Sunday we hear a band playing music. It is mostly marching music. I am told that the band is made up of prisoner musicians. Amidst all the death and starvation for whose entertainment is that?

Some mid-afternoon, I hear the dull thud of an explosion. In the far distance, across a few perimeter fences, I see some prisoners running. I hear the wailing of sirens and the belching of machine-guns. Then silence. No one knows what had happened. After the war I read that the prisoners of the *Sonderkommando*¹ had made an attempt at blowing up one of the crematorium ovens and had succeeded in this. Some of the *Sonderkommando* were shot in the attempt and the others were hanged.

One or two highlights apart there is nothing to distinguish one day from the next; the routine is the same. I am, by now, quite used to the dullness of my

¹ Prisoners who work in the crematoria to dispose of the gassed bodies. At times, they must have found near family amongst the corpses. The prisoners of this commando were given extra rations but were gassed after a time only to be replaced with a new intake.

existence in a concentration camp and to its monotony. In my mind the days merge, one into another. I do not now remember how many days had passed before the next major “event” took place. The incident starts with the usual command: “*Antreten!*” Apprehensively, we line up expecting another “*Selektion*”. A SS man arrives. Is he the same or a different faceless monster? I no longer see their human features; their mannerisms make them all look alike. He struts down the line inspecting his quarry. He points to one and then to another. They are all young. This, I think, is a good sign. Amongst those that he selects is Eva’s brother. He picks Natzi but not the rest of us. It was an unspoken decision that we four must try to keep together. A moment’s inattention of the kapos and Natzi slips back into our group. It is said that the group is destined to work in Gleiwitz 3, a KZ attached to coal mines. I now know that the average life expectancy for those working in the mines was three months. Not one of those selected on that occasion came back.

I remember Saturday the 21st October as a clear, bright day. If it was not, it should have been. It was our sixteenth day, and as it turned out, our last day in Birkenau. Again, it starts with the usual “*Antreten!*”. The SS man who arrives to inspect us seems somehow different. He is not the usual lean, dour exemplar of SS man that I expect to see. He is corpulent, appears quite jovial and holds a bamboo cane in his right hand. He walks down the line of our parade and looks at people. He stops at one, asks his age and his job. Depending on whether the answer suits him, he either asks that person to fall-out or goes to the next in line. As the selected man leaves the rank and crosses to the other side, a kapo imprints a rubber stamp on his arm. Natzi, Erwin and I are picked in turn. Abonyi comes next. The SS man stops at Papa. We cross fingers. Papa gives his age as 45 and his job as *Wasserinstallateur*¹. The SS man places his cane at an upward angle against his trousers imitating a penis, laughs and says: “*Also, pissen kannst Du.*”² People laugh at this crude joke, even Papa. He goes past Papa to the next man. My heart sinks. As everyone seems busy, Papa attempts to smuggle himself across to our side. He is spotted and turned back. The SS man is nearing the end of the inspection and we are worried. We look at Papa as if to say please try again. As the SS man picks the next person Papa moves across with him as if he too, had been picked. My heart pounds. Will he be spotted? The kapo is busy stamping people’s arms and does not notice the manoeuvre. Papa’s turn comes to have his arm stamped and we are safely reunited. A minute or two later the SS man turns round, counts the number of people he had picked and departs. Papa had just managed to scrape in. Poor Jiří did not get picked. He looks sad and depressed to be left on his own. We see the last of him as we are marched away. Jiří did not make it back home.

Nobody knows what we were selected for nor where we are going or, should I say where they are taking us because we are no longer free agents and we can be moved like cattle, at the whim of the “butchers”. Nonetheless, I feel elated to be leaving this charnel house behind. Wherever it is that we are destined for, it can be no worse than the place that we shall leave behind. But, above all, I am overjoyed because we four remain together and I am sanguine and

¹ German: Water installer - a euphemism for plumber.

² German: So, you can piss off!

optimistic of the future. The emotional and practical support we can give each other will prove to be our strength. I march past block 13 with a light heart.

We are taken to a hut where we find a collection of prisoners waiting for us. Before entering, our left arms are inspected for the magic rubber stamp that is to be our passport out off Block 13. We are ordered to strip and to approach one of the prisoners waiting in front of us wielding hair clippers. The hair on our heads has hardly grown but the “barbers” crop off the stubble. On command, I raise my arms to have my arm pits shaved. He clips off the sparse few hair on my chest and then, quite unceremoniously, he gets hold of my penis pulls it forward and with a few deft strokes shaves off the pubic hair.

Our processing continues. We form queues in front of three prisoners sitting on chairs. As each naked man approaches, his name is listed, he is asked to stretch out his left arm and a number is tattooed on its underside. I notice that the tattooers are tattooed. They are branded on the top of their left arm with a large letter A and a number. We four approach the same tattooer in order of age. Papa leads. The man opposite him pulls his arm sharply forward to stretch the skin. With a steady hand he pricks it with a pointed inked pen until he produces a neat number B-13689. I am last. I find the procedure slightly uncomfortable but it is done deftly and is over quickly. My number is B-13692. I wonder whether the letters A and B are serial letters or whether they stand for Auschwitz and Birkenau. Have I nothing better to worry about?

We now have no possessions, no clothes, we do not even own a name. I am not even referred to as Salamon B-13692, just B-13692. I have become a cipher. I shall soon learn that I shall be treated like one and I will have to learn to appear to act like one, too. I am a naked nameless nobody. Physically they are in charge but they have no control of my mind, there I am still myself.

New prison uniforms are issued. They are clean and much warmer than the uniforms we were given on arrival. We still keep the wooden clogs. My prisoner number, written in indelible ink, and the yellow and red triangle in the form of the Magen David, are attached to the tunic on the left side of my chest.

We are put on a train the same afternoon. I do not recall how many of us were on the transport but I seem to remember only one truck load of about 40 sharing it. There is enough room in the truck for all. We are guarded by two elderly soldiers of the home-guard carrying rifles not the automatics carried by the SS. The truck itself has grills across the windows but they are low enough to be able to see out. We do not wait long; the train steams out of this She’ol, this place of the damned called Auschwitz-Birkenau. I am young and in spite of my experience during the last 16 days, there is hope in my heart but because of it, I am elated to be on the move. The thought that if ever I return to this Gehenna it will be as a corpse or to be gassed, is only in the nether regions of my mind. Personal death is not uppermost in my mind.

I crouch on the floor. From time to time I look out of the window at the autumn scene. We are moving through heavily populated areas with houses built in red brick. I am quite unaccustomed to this sight. At home all houses are rendered in plaster. When I ask Erwin about it he explains that it is a

matter of cost and these must be working class dwellings. The train stops at the station at Katowitz. We have been travelling westward. I look out of the window. On the track next to ours stands a passenger train facing the opposite direction and sitting facing me through the window of the compartment is a German officer. He is travelling east, perhaps to join his regiment on the eastern front. I wonder who he is and what his destiny is. He looks at me for a moment and then returns to reading his paper. What does he make of the wan face in prison uniform looking at him. Does he give it a second thought? Does he wonder about me and my destiny?

The old soldiers guarding us are not inimical and seem not unfriendly. One stands near me. He asks me how old I am and where I come from. I take courage and ask him where we are going. He replies "Gleiwitz". Then, with a voice that is unmistakably apologetic he says: "*Ich bin ein Sachse.*"¹ He stresses the word "Sachse" a definite sign that he means to imply that he is not a Prussian or a nazi.

¹ German: I am from Saxony.

KZ Gleiwitz 1.

We march through the gate adorned with “*Arbeit macht frei*”. A band of prisoner musicians plays marching music “welcoming” us to our new “home”. I later learn that it is a march composed by the *Häftling Kapelmeister* entitled Rule Germania. We march in step, berets removed. Two SS men, one on either side of us, count us in. On “eyes left”, I see the stocky, stout SS officer who picked us in Birkenau. He is the *Lager Kommandant*, the camp commandant. We march past the gate; the *Appell Platz* is immediately ahead of us and we come to a halt.

On two opposite sides of the *Appell Platz* are the barracks, several long, narrow huts built in wood, their narrow aspect with the door facing into the square. On the right and to one side there is a structure which, by the smell, is the latrine. On the fourth side, opposite the main gate, there are more huts but they are more distant.

Bareheaded, we stand to attention. The *Lager Kommandant* addresses us. He speaks for a few minutes but I only vaguely remember that he said something about coming here to work. Before “dismiss”, a kapo points to several people “you, you and you” and allocates them to a hut, referred to as block. We four keep close together and the count falls in a way that allocates us to same block.

We enter the hut. Inside, in the anterior part, there is an empty floor space. This is the day area. It has a wood burning stove in its centre. The stove is cold. Further inside, the floor space is filled with bunk beds, three levels high. The beds are very close together: there is just enough room between the rows to enter and for one person to climb into his bunk: there is not enough headroom to sit upright. Bunks are about two feet wide and two persons must share one. There are straw mattresses on each bunk but there are no pillows. There is one blanket per bunk to share between the two occupants. We are lucky: Papa and Natzl share a middle bunk, I share the top bunk with Erwin. We decide to sleep head to foot because it allows us a little extra space.

The block kapo is a short, sharp featured *Häftling* showing a green triangle on his tunic who speaks with a broad Berlin accent. He shows how to make up the bed correctly, straight and smooth. We are warned not to sleep in our jackets nor with the beret on our heads or without trousers. After the concrete floor at Auschwitz, I find the straw mattress like a featherbed. Everything is relative! When we are allowed to retire, I climb up into my bunk, fall into bed, put my jacket and beret under my head as a pillow, the body relaxes and despite the little space that Erwin and I have to share, I sleep soundly and wake with the morning reveille refreshed.

My first day at Gleiwitz is a working Sunday. The factory is closed but prisoners are made to work in the camp. After morning roll-call the *Lager Kommandant* allots the new comers their first job. “*Ihr sollt das Scheisshaus reinigen!*”¹ he orders with glee in his voice. This demonstrates our new station

¹ German: You are to clean out the shit-house.

in life. We are lower than the hewers of wood and the drawers of water; we are the carriers of shit. We walk across to the latrine. It is a roofed over open structure and consists of no more than a large open trench in the ground which is nearly full to the brink with excrement floating in a brown soup of urine. We line up. A few prisoners stand on the wooden platform that runs along the pit. They lower large buckets into the cesspool and then pull them up again with hooks attached to a rope. The first of us in line takes a bucket and carries it to a field a hundred yards or so away where he empties it. The sides of the bucket is heavily soiled. When my turn comes, I try and keep the sides of the bucket away from my trousers. I manage this by walking slightly lopsided, right shoulder weighed down by the bucket, the right arm extended and pointing away from the body. To balance, my left arm points out and up. As I walk, the solid faeces flop about in the liquid slop. I keep a steady eye on the shifting liquid; I walk with a rhythm so that the liquid, when it spills, does not splash on me. I walk fast, the momentum carries me forward. To empty the bucket I must raise its base using my left hand. I have no way to protect it from getting soiled or to clean it afterwards. Once the sludge is discharged, I walk back to the latrine with the empty bucket. The circuit completed, I pick up a full bucket in exchange and start all over again. In no time at all there is a continuous line of humans carrying their loads, mindlessly, mechanically, like an army of ants along the same trail following one another's scent. The kapos stand on the side line along the route and urge us on with "*schnell, schnell, schnell*". After the many days of inactivity and endless waiting I feel quite light hearted and relieved to be working. In spite of the stench and the contorted body, the work is not hard, at least not for the first few rounds. Before long my arms feel like lead, my back aches and once or twice I stagger and nearly stumble. I slow the pace a little, the right arm drops a little, I spill a little; the slop is on my trouser leg and it reeks of shit. When we break for our "midday meal" we eat without being able to wash our hands and when, by late afternoon, the latrine is drained, so am I. After this experience I shall never be squeamish or faddy again. The stink remains in my nostrils. It will be some time before I shall be rid of the smell but then I shall be accustomed to it and shall not notice it.

The latrine is not conducive to "sitting". This is just as well because one is not allowed to spend more than a minute or two to evacuate one's bowels. Using the latrine requires an aptitude for acrobatics. A long wooden pole is fixed along the length of the cesspool. One must learn to squat astride the pole with one's behind hanging precariously over the abyss and one's toes barely touching the wooden platform, dangling like a hanged man with feet dancing on air. One balances and supports oneself as best one can; at first, by holding on to the pole with both hands, later, one becomes more daring and hangs over the abyss "free hand", but not without a care. The slightest nudge is enough to make one very quickly grab hold of the pole to steady one's balance or else one performs an involuntary backward salto mortale into the pit below. One experiences the atavistic fear of falling.

There is no toilet paper to clean up after. When there are leaves about, one uses them. It is just as well that our meagre diet does not make much waste nor causes loose stools. From time to time an SS guard or kapo comes in and hurries people along. The obese *Lager Kommandant's* favourite phrase to the

emaciated on such occasions is: “*Ihr scheisst zu viel. Ich gib’ Euch zu viel zu essen.*”¹

It is dangerous to be outside the protection of the block at night because one never knows who is about. A few weeks after our arrival at Gleiwitz, a prisoner was found dead; he had drowned in the sludge. There was talk that a drunken SS man had beaten him senseless and then pushed him into the mire. Although one is allowed to leave the hut to go to the latrine, one weighs the urgency of relieving one’s needs against the danger of being out in the dark. Normally one goes to the piss bucket at the back of the block and learns to leave the rest for another time. If the need is too great, and one must go outside, one first bares the left arm to the night orderly who writes down the number. If anyone goes missing it is he who is responsible.

Most of the topology of the camp is unknown to me. This, because one does not walk anywhere in the camp unless required to and, in any case, my experience in Auschwitz discourages me from ambling. It is definitely “unhealthy” to stroll aimlessly; a kapo would stop you and ask your business and a severe beating would follow if no explanation is forthcoming.

In my memory there is the image of constantly being counted. The SS appear to have a pathological fear of losing us. We are counted on first assembly on the *Appell Platz*, we are counted on leaving the lager, on arriving at work, on leaving work and again on re-entry into camp and finally, we are counted before our evening rations are distributed. We see the SS at arm’s length distance, guarding us, counting us. We meet them in the camp, we come to a standstill and we dutifully remove our berets. The SS only rarely interact with us. When they do, it is physical, serious and can be lethal. One learns very quickly that when struck by an SS man one must fall to the ground immediately; he will keep hitting out whilst one stands on one’s feet. He takes standing up as an act of defiance and falling down as submission. I remember being slapped across the face by an SS man with such violence that I was sent reeling; I could not have remained standing even if I had wished to be defiant. A day later, whether as a consequence of this physical assault or by some coincidence, I started with an ache in my left ear; this was diagnosed as an otitis externa. Fortunately, our contact with the SS is infrequent.

Only two SS men stand out clearly in my memory. One, a *Obersturmbannführer*, the *Lager Kommandant*. He struts through the camp in his jackboots his big, unmuzzled alsatian by his side. He is capable of setting the dog on you just for the fun of it. His favourite expression of dismissal: “*fick dich weiter!*”². The other, a young, taciturn, grim looking man, a *Volksdeutscher*³ from Yugoslavia, will prove a merciless monster. The *Volksdeutsche* volunteers to the SS have a reputation for being more brutal than the *Reichsdeutsche*⁴ which, on reflection, seems hard to believe possible.

¹ German: You shit too much. I’m feeding you too well.

² German: Fuck off!

³ An ethnic German. One who originates from a country other than Germany.

⁴ A German from the Reich.

It is the kapos who rule us, who tell us what to do, when to do it, who routinely kick and punch and shout at us, who distribute our food and who have their favourites. The kapos are identified by their “badge of office”, an armband that they wear on the left sleeve; one also recognises them by their clean, smart prison uniforms, their general appearance of well being, and their generally arrogant demeanour. They are the kings of the castle, the *Prominenz*. There are kapos of all sorts and they have their own hierarchy. There is the lager kapo, the kitchen kapo, the lazarette kapo, the different works kapos, kapos in charge of a barrack and in charge of a block, kapos for this and kapos for that. They are for the most part Aryans and Reichsdeutsche but there are minor kapos who are of other nationalities, Jews amongst them. The bestialities of the kapos are manifold; they remain in office for so long as their brutalities do not go unnoticed by their masters, the SS and the *Lager Kommandant*. The kapos live apart from us in the huts that I had seen on the far side of the *Appell Platz* on arrival. The other blocks in that area form a central square in the middle of which is a raised platform with two gibbets and nearby an contraption to which prisoners can be strapped when they are whipped. Completing the square are the kitchen, the lazarette and the stores.

During the first few days at Gleiwitz we four work in the *Bau-kommando*¹. We mix mortar, we shovel concrete, we fetch and we carry. Work kommandos are placed under the control of a kapo who is responsible for both, the workforce and the production. In overall charge of building is the Bau-kapo, a Polish Jew, a huge man and well fed. Rumour has it that before his deportation he had been a pimp and brothel keeper. I do not know how true such rumours are: one puts people one dislikes in the worst light. That he is a cruel, *prosst*,² uneducated person of that there is little doubt. Any tardiness he immediately punishes with a kick or worse. The Bau-kapo appoints a kapo over our small work group: he is a man in his forties, an architect, a Jew from Czechoslovakia. This man is a gentle, soft spoken, cultured person; not only is he unable to kick and punch us, he cannot bring himself to shout at us. Our kommando is, given the conditions, quite an happy outfit. Two days later our Czech kapo is demoted to the “ranks” and has to shovel concrete with the rest of us.

Natzi notices a kapo with a familiar face and recognises him as a school friend. He goes up to him and says “Hello, Lustig!” or words to that effect. Lustig recognises Natzi too; he is not overjoyed at meeting a school friend, he does not ask “how are you, is there anything you need?” but, on the other hand, he is not unfriendly. We think that it is good to know a person in authority.

Our daily food intake is scant and monotonous. In the early hours of the morning we queue for some black, hot liquid of ersatz coffee, our ration of one sixth portion of a loaf of bread and a pat of margarine. A loaf is roughly the size of two large hands; it is of no better quality than the bread were given at Auschwitz. I try to save a slice of this bread for the midday soup. To be hungry, to have a slice of bread in one’s pocket and to resist eating it requires much self control. I worry that the bread will crumble in my pocket and that I will lose a few precious crumbs; I worry that it may get stolen or that I may

¹ Building-detail.

² Yiddish: Uncouth.

lose it and thus miss a sizeable proportion of my daily food intake. In the end, the saving of the slice of bread seems worthwhile, not least because there is the emotional satisfaction that I am in control of my baser needs: I still have some human dignity. There is also the physical satisfaction: the watery root vegetable soup, made from beetroot or parsnip, seems more substantial when eaten with a slice of bread. I delude myself that it stills my hunger. I use the bread crust to wipe clean the tin plate in which the soup is served. I moisten a finger to try to capture every last crumb of bread that may have crumbled. Not one drop, not one crumb must be wasted. This is not greed, it is pathological hunger. Hunger pangs permeates one's whole being to the exclusion of most other sensations. When, on occasion, I find a little sliver that looks like a few fibres of meat, I experience a great sense of excitement and talk of the meat in the soup for the rest of the day.

When the day's work is finished and the evening roll-call has been taken, we queue for the evening food. It consists of a quarter loaf of bread, a pat of margarine, a slice of sausage and black "coffee". We eat the food inside the hut. We stand by our bunks and use them as tables. I recently read that our total daily food intake was only 200 calories. The required daily intake for normal low activity is about 1000 calories. We are being slowly starved to death.

Early into our stay at Gleiwitz, Natzi places his evening bread ration on top of his bunk. He turns for one moment to speak to one of us. In the next instant, in spite of all of us being present, the bread has gone. There is a person standing next to Natzi but he looks as if butter would not melt in his mouth and one piece of bread looks like another: one can fume but can do no more. We had not yet learned lesson number one: never take your eyes off your bread or anything else that belongs to you or it will disappear instantly. This time, we share our bread with Natzi. I am annoyed at this, he should have been more attentive. Much of the annoyance is due to youthful selfishness for having to share my meagre rations. Lesson number two: we learn the importance of sharing sleeping quarters with a companion one can trust. Had he been alone, he would have gone without food that night.

There is in the camp a young man, a year or two older than I, his name is Moishe. He had been a student at a Yeshiva in Poland. Whether at work or at rest his lips move constantly; when he is not praying, he is reciting psalms. He does not eat the sausage because it is not kosher, he exchanges it for margarine; from the number of calories, an unfavourable exchange. I hope that his God looked upon him favourably, rewarded him for his steadfastness and that he survived, though I doubt it.

The daily routine changes little. There is a roster for barrack duties: the wooden floors have to be swept, the piss bucket has to be emptied. There are about 300 people sharing the hut and by the morning the bucket is brim full, it is heavy. It takes two people to carry it to the cesspool and unless the two carriers match their steps carefully, the liquid will spill. This is not a pleasant job.

It is now the end of October, the nights are getting longer; it is still very dark when we are roused to start our day. There is no time to linger, to stay in bed

another minute or two, the Block kapo makes sure of that. I jump down off the top bunk, put on my jacket and beret, slip my feet into the clogs. Erwin and I level the straw mattress, fold the blanket and leave the bed looking as required by regulation. This is important. A spot check of the barrack can take place at any time and we would be punished if things are not as ordered. I go to the latrine to relieve myself. Right next to it there is the wash and shower room but only cold water comes from the taps. There is no soap. I rinse my hands and splash my face. If I am not quite awake yet, the cold water on my face wakens me. It is now time for roll-call assembly and to draw the morning ration.

We undergo a regular lice control check and attend the barber on a weekly basis. He shaves our faces and scalps but does not appear to bother to trim body hair. We are ordered to have showers but these come at irregular intervals. It is a pleasurable experience to feel the warm water running down one's back. It is an offence not to go for a shower when ordered or to go for one out of turn. We are issued towels for showers. On one occasion Papa manages to keep a towel which he then uses under his shirt to help to keep out the cold.

In situations of stress any change in the status quo produces uncertainty and angst. So, when after a week working in the camp, we are assigned to work in the factory, I have mixed feelings about the move. On the one hand I view the prospect of working in a new environment with some apprehension because "the devil one knows is better than the devil one doesn't." On the other hand the thought of leaving the concentration camp, even for just a few hours each day, is something to look forward to with some anticipation.

My first march to the factory proves exciting simply for my physical presence outside the lager. It is still dark, the perimeter flood lights are on. After the morning Appell and after drawing our breakfast ration, the factory kommando falls-out, forms into a column. We march in step toward the gate and are counted as we go through it. The gates shut behind us. Once through the gate we walk, rather than march, in columns three or four abreast. Despite being flanked on both sides by armed SS guards my world suddenly expands, it is no longer limited by barbed wire fences. I take a deep breath, the air is chilly but outside the lager perimeter the air seems clearer, cleaner. In charge of the SS guards is the young, grim looking SS man, his revolver in the holster. Hatred of the prisoners that he guards flashes from his eyes like fiery sparks. His every action is malevolent and designed to cause us pain. When he looks in our direction, he does not look at us but through us as if we were some phantasmagoria.

Twenty minutes walk and we arrive at the factory. It is a railway wagon works. We assemble just inside the works. The SS man counts us; he wants to be sure that no one had escaped on the way from the camp. When the numbers tally, the inner chain of sentries is posted and the outer chain is withdrawn. In the evening after work, when the numbers agree the procedure is reversed and we are marched back to camp.

On our first day at the wagon works we report to a kapo who asks our trades. The job one is given does not reflect the job one is qualified for. I am to work

with Gärtner, a man from Bratislava, a refrigerator salesman who has turned engineer. In charge over us is a civilian, *Meister*¹ Hamulka by name. The name is Polish but he speaks perfect German. Across the centuries, frontiers in this area ebb and flow, hither and thither, as they do to this day: the Slavs push westward and the Germans have the “*Drang nach Osten*”²: the man with the Polish name considers himself a German. He is in his middle fifties and seems a decent fellow. Apart from supervising our work he is also in charge of a young Polish civilian who operates a lathe.

As a first task, we are to repair the machinery of a lathe which has broken down. There is no instruction manual. Good God, I think, what’s wrong with it and where does one start? but Gärtner is undaunted by the prospect. He tells me that he has repaired fridges, and he assures me that the principle is the same; he certainly knows how to handle tools. He is quite a handyman. We take off the machine head and start to remove the innards of the mechanical beast. Days go by. Bit by bit, gear by gear the lathe is dismantled. There are clip springs and cog wheels and shafts of all sizes. Gärtner carefully places all parts belonging together in the order in which he withdraws them. He is very methodical but there are a great number of parts and I hope to God that Gärtner knows how to reassemble them again else they will hang us both for sabotaging the war effort.

After a time, my hands are rough and chafed from the cold; the engine oil, the grease and the dirt get into the crevices of the broken skin and without detergent and without soap and hot water it will not wash off; however hard I try, I cannot get rid of it. After a time I do not even try. It will take weeks after liberation for the dirt, the grit and grime partly to wash out but mostly to grow out.

Whilst Gärtner works on the lathe I act as his assistant. We do not talk about women, our libido is too depressed for that. We suffer from chronic hunger and we talk about food that we enjoyed in the past. I had read about ham and eggs - the “English breakfast”. Being kosher at home I often wondered what that wonderful meal must be like. He describes the texture and flavour and taste and the smell to me. It is quite mouth watering and we are being quite masochistic.

The wagon works is quite large. We are in the engineering section. Not too distant from us are railway trucks standing above inspection pits in which prisoners work. One has little occasion to walk around but when one does one always walks purposefully, carrying some implement to give the appearance of activity. Papa gets around easily: his job is to go round with brush and shovel, clearing the floor of debris.

The toilet facilities in the works are clean and compared with the primitive latrine in the camp, they are superb. There are separate facilities for *Reichs-deutsche*, for *Fremdarbeiter*³ and, needless to say, for us, the *Häftlinge*. There are no toilets for women but then we appear to be in an all male establishment

¹ German: A qualified tradesman who has completed a full apprenticeship.

² German: Impulse eastward.

³ German: Foreign labourer.

and I have not seen a woman's face since I left the truck at Auschwitz. The toilet floor is hard tiled and the walls are partly covered in white tiles. There are a few hand wash basins and apart from the urinals, there are three cubicles with flush toilets and, luxury of luxuries, there is toilet paper. The doors to the cubicles cannot be locked and they do not quite reach to floor level so that one can see if they are occupied. After the luxury of these toilet facilities, I shall rarely use the primitive latrine in the camp again. Linger in the toilets is not encouraged; one is allowed a shit but not a shirk. Here, as in the lager, the kapos and SS men make sure of that.

The Meister asks me what I had done to be put in a prison camp. When I explain the reason for my imprisonment, he looks at me incredulously. It appears that many local people, living with all the concentration camps in their midst, do not appreciate the magnitude of what their nazi masters are doing.

The midday food is brought from the camp kitchen in two big vats and is served to us by a kapo in the works. We queue for our food and every man hopes that when his turn comes the ladle will be dipped deeper and will bring up a thicker soup. On one occasion as the full vat is carried into the works, a parsnip spills out and drops on the dirty shop floor near where I stand. I dive for it, pick it up and stuff the windfall into my mouth. After nearly half a century, this is a very minor incident in my life, an incident which I can easily rationalise by remembering the dietary deprivation, to give hunger a modern euphemism, that I underwent. In the early years after the war, when I tried to come to terms with my concentration camp experience, it was an act of major proportions which epitomised the de-humanizing factor which I endured during the incarceration. I agonised about this incident. I thought myself the lowest of the low for what I saw a despicable act. I wrote many hundred words in my diary before I came to terms with this action.

One day, the Meister is present when I eat the thin liquid that is dished up for the midday meal. I see him look at it in astonishment but he says nothing. The next day, he whispers that he had put something in the drawer of his locker. I am to leave it there until he has gone and then to take it to where I cannot be observed. He puts his finger fleetingly to his lips; I must keep mum about it. I remove the package wrapped in newspaper, put it inside my tunic and take it to a toilet cubicle. I unwrap it. My eyes light up. It is a slice of bread with dripping. I gobble it up. It is real bread not the saw dust I have become used to. Oh, and the dripping! it tastes what ambrosia must have tasted to the gods on mount Olympus. To be able to read a few paragraphs of the newspaper is an added bonus. Meister Hamulka has taken quite a risk to do this kindness. Being caught aiding prisoners carries heavy penalties, he could have ended up in a camp himself. When he comes round again, I look into his eyes with gratitude. It is not just the food. The fact that in the midst of this hell there is a decent human being, a German, who does this kindness, is overwhelming. He brings more of these thin slices of bread from time to time and, on cold days, gives me jobs to do that keep me near the radiators. By chance or by some preordination I have experienced this juxta positioning of good and evil, again and again. Father Pozdech, the fiacre driver, the *Blockälteste* in Auschwitz and now Meister Hamulka. They are few, their names are different but they are the

same: THEY are the essence of humanity and it is the millions of fanatic nazi beasts, who are the aberration. In years to come, memories of such small kindnesses will help me to come to terms with my camp experience, will help me to re-establish my emotional stability and my social conscience.

On non-working Sundays, if my recollection is correct, we are allowed an extra half hour in bed. We make up our bunks, do our ablutions and except for using the latrine, we stay cooped up in the hut all day. Since we are not allowed out, there can be no free mingling with prisoners of the other blocks. In any case, we have become asocial animals and we do not appear to be much bothered by this restriction. One becomes self contained and wrapped up in one's own needs. Gregarious as I am, I do not remember feeling the need for meeting people; I cannot recall that I related to any stranger in my own hut where there was no restriction to meeting or talking to other prisoners. What is there that one can usefully discuss with strangers under such barbarous conditions? the hunger? the cold? the exhaustion? the craving for freedom? the longing for the loved ones? the pain in one's soul? Everyone thinks his own thoughts, dreams his own day-dreams, has his own nightmares.

On such Sundays, all food is served in the block. Two men from the block are sent to the kitchen to collect the vat of food. They are the *Kesselträger*, the carriers of the cauldrons. This is a much sought after job; being near the kitchen it is sometimes possible to "organise"¹ some food for instant consumption. Who goes, depends on the *Blockälteste*, a *Reichsdeutscher* with a green triangle, a common criminal, who has his favourites. It is he who ladles out the food. If he likes your face he will push the ladle deeper into the soup and bring up a thicker mix. The other job much in demand is to be appointed a *Kesselwäscher*.² Erwin was once picked to return the vats to the kitchen and to do the washing up. Whilst in the kitchen, he was able to eat some soup that was left over and he returned with a spare plate of soup for the three of us to share. A welcome supplement to the daily ration.

On such Sundays, times hangs heavy on one's hands. One is not allowed either to sit or to lie on the bunk and one stands about aimlessly. On one such occasion I think that I would want to write a diary of events. I decide to ask the Meister at work for a copy book and pencil. He refuses and my diary remains unwritten. This is fortunate. Random checks for anything and at any times can take place inside the hut or outside. An SS man enters the block. We jump to attention and remove our berets. He strides into the room with a swagger. He inspects the bunks to see whether or not they are correctly made up. He pulls away some blankets and mattresses to see if anything is hidden under them. Had he found a copy book under my bunk, it would have been the end of both I and Erwin because we shared the bunk. The Meister would have been in serious difficulty for supplying book and pencil.

On one such Sunday when all prisoners are in their respective huts, I hear a new command. "*Absperre!*"³ The *Blockälteste* stands at the door and locks it. The dreaded word "Selektion" is heard. The SS have decided to cull the

¹ From camp slang: "organisieren" is a euphemism for stealing.

² German: A person who washes dishes.

³ German: Closure.

population, to weed out the *Muselmann*¹, to make room for a fresh intake of prisoners. Some people will die to make room for others. This is what must have happened when we were brought to Gleiwitz. My elation was someone else's fatal sorrow. But there is no time to reflect on that now. Will the "angel of death" pick one of us? We push Papa slightly into the background where he is not seen too well. As the SS man is seen to approach our hut, the *Block-älteste* unlocks the door to admit him. We freeze to attention. My body feels rigid, my muscles taut, my mouth dry, the adrenaline flows, I can hear my heart beat. It is a sign of unmitigated fear. There is no escape - my mind can only focus on this instant in time. The SS man looks fleetingly at people's faces. He comes ever nearer, he glances briefly at us in passing and then he looks at the next person. I go limp. Papa is safe once again, we relax but the SS man picks out two people who are immediately segregated. How many more selections before the blow will fall on one of us? I dare not think about that; one can only live from one minute to the next and tomorrow is a long time off. For now, another crisis has passed. A young boy next to me tells me that his father was taken because his balls were hanging down². I am shocked: my sensibilities are offended. I think this a very disrespectful and dreadful thing to say of his father.

In my middle teens I taught myself to read music and to play the mandolin - to strum is the more accurate expression. When the thought occurs to me to try and join the camp band, I have so little idea of music that I do not realise that a mandolin would hardly fit amongst the brass and violins of the orchestra. In any case, I am known to be impatient, my mind works too quickly for my tongue, everything must happen instantly and I have therefore little sense of correct timing, be it telling a story or playing music. But, I see the musicians cleanly dressed, relatively well fed and I have these wild fantasies. When, one day, I see the Kapellmeister I ask him whether he needed a musician who plays the mandolin. He is very civil and pleasant. No, there is no mandolin in the camp but to come across to their hut to see him. When I relate this to the family, Erwin forbids me to go. I am too naive to understand why but I do not really mind because, in a rational moment, I am not all that sure that I can master the mandolin if ever I was offered an audition.

I hurt myself slightly at work. It is nothing serious, a small wound on my hand which does not heal and starts to fester. I report to the KB³ after the evening roll-call. The lazarette is amongst the complex of huts where some of the kapos and the musicians live. There is a long queue of people reporting sick. When my turn comes, I learn that the young doctor who looks at my hand originates from Slovakia. He is very pleasant. He cleans the wound, puts on some ointment and bandages it. I am declared fit for work and need not report back to him. Walking back from the KB I meet Quastler, a school friend. I remember him as a very quick witted intelligent person. He wears a nice clean uniform and looks well fed. I knew that he was in the camp, but I have lost sight of him when he moved out of our hut. He tells me that he has transferred into the musicians' hut. I did not know that Quastler plays a musical instru-

¹ Camp slang: A prisoner on his last leg ready for the gas chamber.

² His father had a hernia.

³ Pronounce as kah-bay. An abbreviation for Krankenblock - a sick-bay.

ment. He tells me that his duties are to keep the hut clean and that the Kapellmeister was his special friend. I am old enough to know about homosexuality and the penny suddenly drops. I realised why Erwin was against my going to visit the musicians' hut.

Being ill can lead to catastrophic results. Thus, when Natzi goes down with diarrhoea, it is a major problem. I do not know how he managed to pick it up because we all eat the same food. There it was, he had the runs. He reports to the KB and is given some pills. Natzi decides that he will only eat bread. We give him slices of our bread in exchange for his margarine and sausage. It is December, the wood stove is lit and he toasts slices of bread on it. It is fortunate that the diarrhoea subsides after a day. Apart from losing body fluids, he is emaciated and can hardly afford to reduce his food intake. In January, Papa complains of his ankles swelling. We put it down to his being on his feet all day, cleaning the factory floor. We are quite unaware that this is a clinical sign of starvation. We all have shrivelled to skeletons, we look like our own ghosts and we do not notice that Papa is turning into a *Muselmann*.

On returning from work one evening we do not stop at the usual *Appell Platz* to be counted but are marched further to the area where the kapos' barracks are. We form up into three sides of a square. A platform completes the square. On it two vertical posts with a cross bar joining them. It looks rather like a goal post except for the two sturdy hooks inserted into the cross member. I have not been to this area of the lager before; the sight of the scaffold with the gibbets and the thought that men were hanged on it, dying in agony, sends a cold shiver down my spine. Following a head count which is quickly completed, the kapos set to checking our pockets. Some are asked to drop their pants. Lustig, the kapo, Natzi's school friend, is checking on our side. He asks Papa to unbutton his jacket and finds the towel which Papa wears under his shirt for extra warmth. He tears it off him and violently slaps his face. We are angry with the young whippersnapper but might is on his side. Whilst this goes on, there is a commotion on the adjacent side of the parade. A man is pulled out of the rank by a kapo and handed over to an SS man. I do not remember what it was that they found on him or what he had done. The SS man keeps on hitting him and raves: "*Dich werden wir sofort aufhängen!*"¹ The SS man orders a rope. The prisoner gets on his knees, squirms on the ground, he begs for his life to be spared. The SS monster grins at the prisoner's supplication. We stand in suspense watching the man's mental torment. For some reason the SS man relents and orders the man to be flogged. He is strapped to the contraption and is whipped by a kapo. I cannot remember the number of strokes he received. The sight of a man being whipped is not pleasant. The screams of pain ring in one's ears. I am, by now, sufficiently mentally detached or perhaps dehumanised to be inured to the sight and sound of cruelty; other peoples agonies impinge on my consciousness, my eyes are open, my ears are clear but my mind is shut to them. I am as relieved at not having to watch a hanging as I am that the prisoner was not hanged. It is mentally impossible always to share the pain and agony of fellow human beings and not suffer a mental breakdown. We are dismissed. We

¹ German: You, boy, will be strung up right now!

queue for our evening food. We eat it in silence because at the back of the mind is the realization that that man could have been any one of us.

The mental torment of my condition is far worse than that endured by a criminal. The common criminal knows that he is deprived of his liberty because he broke the Law: he has taken his chance and he has to pay the price. He knows how long his incarceration will last. He can count down the years, months, days: he can see the numbers getting smaller and he can look forward to be free at some time. There is some comfort in this. My incarceration is different. I am imprisoned because THEY broke the Law, because THEY are the criminals. I do not know how much longer I shall have to serve. I can mark the passing of time but there is no counting-down only a counting-up of the days and months of servitude endured and the numbers get larger. From the clearly expressed intentions of the nazis I should have known that it will be a short life sentence without remission. I should have realised that unless the most improbable conjunction of circumstances occurs, the only exit is by way of the chimney. Fortunately, I did not. I closed my mind to any such thoughts and endured, at least at first. Some, a few, some very few, like Shakespeare's Hamlet, question the purpose of it all: rather than endure the physical pain of day to day hunger and deprivation, rather than accept the human degradations, rather than vainly hope that the *Muselmann* stage has not yet been reached, rather than suffer the mental torment of waiting for the inevitable next *Selektion* which will prove that it has, rather than strive to survive another day, struggle to suffer another week, perhaps a few months before he too succumbs and ends up in a heap of ashes, he realises the hopelessness of his predicament, makes one final effort at controlling his own destiny and voluntarily puts an end to himself.

Under such conditions of unnatural stress, credulity of the improbable is expanded. One grasps at straws of one's imagination. I am no different. I am ready to believe anything at all that gives some hope of redemption. Rumours in the lager spread like wildfire. Nobody knows how they get started: some rumours are about day to day arrangements in the camp, others are wild and far out. I meet a man in the camp who tells me that he heard that Russian parachutists had landed in Bratislava. I do not bother to find out how and from who he heard this news, or question if he is just having me on. I, the doubting Thomas who questioned the news about Auschwitz that Hansi told me because I could not accept that such things happened, now, because it is news that I wish to believe, I find reason enough to accept the falsehood readily and excitedly.

Under such conditions of mental trauma, the rational mind aberrates and seeks a future of natural conditions. I play an innocuous game with fate. The intention of this game is to challenge fate to act in my favour. The 18th day of the month is my birth date. On the 18th November I decide to use the left-most cubicle of the toilet because it is farthest from the door. Using a nail, I make my mark in the grouting between the tiles of this cubicle; I inscribe the date, 18.XI.44 and my initials, two downstrokes of the letter "H" superimposed on the letter "S", in the form of the dollar sign. I shall use the middle cubicle in December and the right-most one in January; I shall inscribe each with a similar message. The January cubicle is near the door. I persuade myself that

when the last inscription, 18.I.45, has been made, there being no more cubicles, I shall have reached the door which, in my mind, I associate with the exit that leads me to freedom. How I convinced myself of this, I cannot now imagine. One clings to straws.

Under such conditions of abnormal existence, the mind demands escape from the mental stress. I fantasise a far more dangerous game with fate. It starts with a daydream where everything is possible but which, if put into effect, would have ended in tragic reality. The locker next to the Meister's belongs to the young Polish worker. He keeps it locked. On one occasion he puts a blue overall and a peaked cap in his locker and does not replace the lock. I think he does this on purpose and does so very pointedly in my presence. The next day, the day after and for a week or so after that, the overall remains in the open locker and he makes no attempt either to retrieve it or to lock its door. My imagination runs riot. Has he left it there for me to take to aid me in escape? How does one go about escaping? Possible scenarios form in my mind, one wilder than the next. I would first steal the overall, then go to the toilet to change into them. Which day of the week and what time of the day would it be best to do this? It occurs to me that an escape may be possible by hanging onto the undercarriage of a railway truck as it leaves the work. Once outside the chain of inner sentries, I would lay low till dark. I do not even consider the possibility that the guards would inspect the truck. I would find my way to the station and once again attach myself to the undercarriage of a train. Before attempting this "daring" escape I would eat a little less bread each day so that I would accumulate one or two days bread ration. The more I think about it the more rampant my imagination. I decide not mention any of this to my family; they will think that I am mad and stop me from escaping. I attempt to visualise different scenarios but since I have no idea of the topology or of the sentry checks, my imagination runs wild with brain-wave schemes. I try to work up the courage to set things in motion. When the young Pole finally removes his overall I hear him say to himself "ah, that's where I have put them". This puts an end to further fantasies.

One day, the young Pole offers to sell me some tobacco. Do I know anyone in the lager who wants to buy. He wants a certain number of Reichsmark for it. I decide to visit the KB again and speak to the young doctor; he seems to me the only person who is in some position to buy. I add a margin of profit for being the middleman and for having to take the risk of smuggling the tobacco into the camp. The doctor is interested; he says that he can find the money. I take the contraband and with not a little trepidation I march through the barrier of the lager where we are counted, looking as innocent as I can hoping that we will not be searched today. I pass muster. I have managed to smuggle the little tobacco into the camp. The doctor takes delivery but he would pay for it in a few days time, he says. After a week the Pole presses for payment and I see the doctor again. He is just a bit unpleasant about it - I have the impression that he thinks that I am a wheeler dealer and that the tobacco is baksheesh for favours to be received. I explain that I am being pressed for payment and after another day or so he hands over the money, rather ungraciously, I think. I have not handled money for some months now and it is a strange sensation to have some in my pocket in such circumstances. The money is hot and I hand it over the next day. With the profit, the Pole buys some bread. Erwin is unhappy

about the whole arrangement and when I am offered some more tobacco, I refuse for the time being. Before any further action can be taken the military situation changes rapidly and there will not be many more days when I shall be going to work in the factory.

One afternoon in late December, the alarm sounds for the end of the working day. We down tools and gather to be numbered and to march "home" under escort. We line up. Along comes the grim looking young SS man to count us. He walks along the rank pointing his finger at each file as he counts. He comes to the end of the line, looks puzzled, stops for a moment, returns to the head of the column and starts to count again. This has not happened before, obviously something is amiss. He calls over another SS man and they both count us. It is now evident that the number does not tally with the morning count.

We stand to attention; we are not allowed to move. A party of SS men and kapos is dispatched to search the works for the missing person. After an half hour or so they return escorting a young man. I remember him. He is Gyuri, the young Hungarian with a lilt in his voice and a skip in his walk who normally strides one or two places ahead of us on the way to and from work. He now whimpers and he drags his feet. He has the look of a whipped dog. There is fear and terror on his face. He is suffering the mental pain and agony of the ruthless and brutal punishment that he knows he will have to endure. He knows that it will cause him much physical pain.

At last, we are ordered to march off but Gyuri does not walk in his usual place; he is made to walk behind the column, guarded by an SS man. Word passes down the line that he was found asleep in one of the inspection pits under a railway truck; he did not hear the end of work-day bell. We talk about this in whispers as we walk along. I remember the whipping I was made to watch and it does not take any imagination to realise the flogging he will get when we return to the concentration camp. Poor fellow he must be suffering mental torture waiting for the dreadful punishment. Will we be made to watch it?

It is now very dark. We pass through the built-up area and approach some fields not far from the camp. The grim SS man who has been near the head of the column now passes us on his way to the rear. It looks that he is going to give this poor hapless person a foretaste of a beating even before we get back to the lager. Suddenly, I hear the sharp crack of a pistol shot. My heart misses a beat. What was that? but of course I know. A few minutes later two kapos come running from the camp carrying an empty, rolled up stretcher; they rush back carrying on it a covered up body.

Later, we are told that the *Häftling* was shot for trying to escape. Poor Gyuri. His only crime was being a Jew: this merited the loss of freedom, the detention in a KZ and finally being put to death with impunity by a callous gunman. I suppose that after this murder the SS man went home to his supper and beer or to his girl friend not giving this incident another thought; perhaps, he even joked about it with his mates. After all, it was only a Jew who he shot dead and that was what his job was all about, killing Jews. A heartless mur-

derer pulled the trigger that fired the bullet that killed Gyuri. But, an equal share of the guilt for this murder lies at the door of those, past and present, who, whilst teaching salvation and absolution from sin through the crucifixion, embrace the contradictory and iniquitous concept of unremitting and unrelenting eternal guilt when it concerns the Jews. It is this concept that prepared the population for the de-humanization of the person of the Jew which, in turn, led them to accept the thought of judeocide with equanimity. It is this legacy of centuries of such bigotry that created the environment that permitted conditions to flourish where nazi atrocities could be enacted. It is this philosophy that catered for the pornography of terror in the past and does to this day. Gyuri was one individual; multiply Gyuri's fate by six million and the obscenity of Jew baiting is demonstrated.

Christmas is approaching. As an orthodox Jewish family this is not a festival which we ever celebrated. It always seemed the antithesis of all that Jewish theology teaches. Christmas is supposed to be a season of goodwill towards all Men but there is precious little of that here.

It has been snowing. The brightness reflected by the snow adds little to the scene and detracts nothing from the gloom of the monotones of a concentration camp tableau. There is no Christmas tree nor any Christmas decoration. The musicians and some kapo have prepared a revue which we are made to attend. A hut is transformed into a theatre complete with a stage, curtain and seating. We trundle along and enter the well lit hut. The front rows are reserved for SS men and we sit in behind. There is of course, the obligatory performance of "Deutschland über alles" to which we all stand to attention with our berets removed. Rule Germania is played as an "overture". The revue is funny, its subject is life in a KZ. The writing of the sketches, the rehearsing, the painting of the backdrops shows the talent amongst the producers. It must have taken many months of preparation but then, their duties are few. I am sure that some actors, like the clown in Opera, perform laughing on the outside and weeping on the inside. The *Lager Kommandant* puts in an appearance in the middle of the performance. Everything stops. We rise to attention, he sits on a chair in the front row and the show continues. On reflection, how incongruous it now all seems but then I enjoyed the show. For an hour or so it took me out of myself, I forgot where I was and I lost myself in the memory of the many theatre performances I had enjoyed only a few months earlier.

A new year is nearly upon us. 1945. A time to reflect, a time to look forward. We have succeeded in keeping together, we have each other to relate to, to trust and to lean on, this is what sustains us and therein lies our strength. "This year we are slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, next year we shall be free men" this quotation from the Haggadah¹ appropriately springs to mind: We wish ourselves "Next year in Bratislava" mimicking the prayer of "next year in Jerusalem" uttered also at Passover time. In my heart of hearts I do not really believe this possible, it is just a fervent hope, an ardent prayer.

An SS guard asks Erwin and I to clean out his barrack room and promises us some bread. This is very unusual because we would have to do any job that he

¹ Liturgical book relating the story of the Exodus.

orders us without any reward. We think that he must be a decent person. He takes us through the gate into the SS camp. They live two to the room. He sits himself at the table reading a newspaper and tells us to sweep the floor. I ask "could we have some bread now?" He turns quite nasty, "*eine Frechheit*"¹ he yells. He calls us names "*gemeine Schweine*"². After sweeping the floor he orders us to clean and polish his black boots. He then gives us each a slice of bread. He will not let us take the bread back into the camp and orders us to eat it there and then. We very humbly say thank you very much, Sir. He lets us walk back into the lager by ourselves.

It is the middle of January, Gärtner and I have been reassembling the gear box of the lathe; things are going well. The *Lager Kommandant* pays a surprise visit to the railway works and asks how much longer it will be before the lathe is in working order. Gärtner promises it ready within a few more days. More significantly, we hear the sirens of an air alarm for the first time. There are no air raid shelters for us, we are confined to the huts and the doors are locked on us. If there were a fire we would all perish, we would be unable to get out. I feel quite elated, the Germans are not having it all their own way any more. They are getting a dose of their own medicine. In the night, I can hear the distant dull boom of detonations which I now assume, must have been cannon fire. One day we wake to the fact that an officer of the Wehrmacht has replaced the SS *Lager Kommandant*. The situation changes nearly instantly. Things are less tense. We are given milk once a day. Just imagine - milk in a German KZ. My excitement knows no bounds. Perhaps things will improve further and life will become more tolerable.

Today is Thursday the 18th of January 1945. Today I am exactly seventeen years and seven months old. Today it is exactly 17 weeks since we were abducted. Today it is 119 nights since we were wrenched from our warm beds. Today is the day when I place my final mark in the grouting of the last toilet cubicle. Have I persuaded fate to act or will I persuade myself that I have to start all over again with the first cubicle. Will I be here to write 18.II.45?

The lathe is nearly reassembled. The cogs and wheels and springs are getting fewer; another day or two and we shall be able to screw the head on again. Gärtner has taught me a great deal about how machinery is assembled and I shall never again be afraid of tackling any job. At the last moment we notice that there is one gear wheel that we missed to place. Gärtner is worried, it will take us another week to get back to the level at which we forgot to replace that one cog and the *Lager Kommandant*, if he returns, is not going to like it.

After returning to the lager on Saturday the 20th we are told that tomorrow we shall be evacuating Gleiwitz temporarily. We are given no reason but of course we know the answer: we have been hearing the thunder of distant artillery, we have seen the many overflights of Russian aircraft, we have had several air alarms. The Germans are no longer the all conquering nation, devastating other people's countries and lives; now they must fight on their home territory. It is their homesteads, their fields that will be destroyed. Will

¹ German: What a cheek!

² German: Common pigs.

they be putting up a fierce resistance? Rumour has it that we shall return to Gleiwitz when the military situation is stabilised.

The Long March.

Ever since we arrived in Auschwitz, I experience a sense of the unreal. Intellectually I am aware of the reality of what is happening and I understand the consequence of actions I take but the experience is too nightmarish for waking reality. This unreality is more pronounced when changes in my physical conditions occur. Of course, at the time when a change occurs, I do not know whether it will be a change for the better or for the worse but, by some protective psychological mechanism, I experience a feeling of lightheartedness that makes me welcome that change. On this occasion, I realise that we are not being taken on a picnic outing. Yet, I have this sense of going on a holiday walk. Little do I know that fate has favoured me and that within a few days I shall be rid of my persecutors.

The morning of the 21st, the day of evacuation, dawns. It is early morning. It had been snowing and the air is cold and fresh. It will turn out to be a dry, grey but clear day. All healthy prisoners assemble on the *Appell Platz*. I overhear someone say that the old *Lager Kommandant* has been seen in the camp and that he is in charge of the evacuation. After the short experience of the army officer, I am disappointed but I am doubly relieved that we are leaving. The thought of having to explain to him why the lathe gear box is unfinished is not a prospect to look forward to.

We each draw provisions for three days. I am entitled to one and one quarter loaves! We four get five loaves between us! My eyes pop at the sight of so much bread in our possession. To a hungry stomach, this is a great deal of food. One must resist the temptation of eating more than one's allotted ration at one time. My habit of saving a slice of bread for the midday soup now helps me to overcome this urge. In any case, we keep the bread communally between the four so there is no chance that I can take more than my daily ration. But, we must be wary; there will be some who will not have the self-restraint and who will be unable to resist the temptation; they will run out of food and this will drive them to the desperate act of stealing food from others. There will also be the opportunistic thieves who will relieve the unwary of his bread. We must guard our rations or else they will disappear.

We are led out of the lager. I do not bother to take a last look at Gleiwitz but I notice the sick who stay behind in KB, observing us leave. They were told that they will be moved by lorry. I now know that all were killed by the SS before the assassins relinquished the camp.

We do not march but walk at a leisurely rate. Our guards do not push the pace. There is little traffic passing us, just the occasional army vehicle in either direction. When such cars appear in the distance, we are ordered to step off the road into the side trenches so that we do not impede the progress of the vehicle. We walk the minor roads but, considering that there is a war on, the lack of traffic is surprising. We pass through no towns, villages or hamlets and there are not even isolated farmsteads to be seen. We traverse a forest that cuts out most of the winter light and makes things look gloomy. We walk along tree lined roads that look like endless straight avenues stretching away into the

distance with empty fields, covered in white, on both sides. We talk a little as we amble but there is not much to talk about. We have no hard news of the progress of the war only self-created rumours that reflect our wishful thinking; we wonder if Bratislava has been liberated and what Avri would be doing. We talk of Mamma and Renka as still alive; are they marching somewhere? I wonder how Mamma is coping with her bunions and rheumatism in the snow and the cold. To my mind they are undergoing an experience similar to ours. Whatever my intuition tells me, I have not yet accepted that they are no more. It is not until sometime in June, after the end of the war, when Papa and I travel by train from the High Tatras back to Bratislava, that, by coincidence, we meet an old friend, Fredy, on a platform somewhere in Slovakia. I speak of a hopeful reunion with my mother and sister. He, very bluntly puts me straight. Papa and I have a good cry and the hard truth, which was there in my heart of hearts, is suddenly accepted as stark reality. Fredy has now been dead for a long time but I have never quite forgiven him for breaking the harsh cold reality with such suddenness. But all that is in the future. And what, fortunately, lies even further in the future is the knowledge of the dreadful death they died. The realization that the gas the Germans used did not kill the victims instantly but suffocated them over several minutes. Can one imagine the mental torment of those locked in a room, gasping for air realizing that there was no air! desperately trying to escape realizing that there was no escape! clawing the walls in desperation! And can one visualise the callousness of the perpetrators coolly observing through peep holes the death throws and the dying agonies of their victims. And then one should ponder the sacrilegious exploitation of the corpses; the hair of the massacred women and the gold of the victim's extracted teeth and even the very ashes of the incinerated martyred. And the God who claims "an eye for an eye - a tooth for a tooth" as a just retribution has allowed the perpetrators to prosper. Where is the divine justice in that? But as I said, such emotions were still in the future.

After a while we fall silent. At first, walking is quite pleasant. It is not much different from walking to the wagon works only today we keep on moving. We break for food once; we sit or stand by the roadside and eat our bread. Towards the afternoon we are getting tired and the column slows down; the guards urge us along in no uncertain way. It gets dark quite early in January but we walk on in the dark. As we tire, some people fall behind. Rank by rank they get nearer to the end of the column. We think that they will be allowed to travel on the carts that follow the column of people but the rearguard SS men make sure that no one gets passed them. They will not hold up the marching column for people who cannot keep pace with the rest. I hear the report of a pistol; I know that someone has no more walking to do. Now that we know what to expect, let's walk on, let's keep pace to the end.

At long last, we arrive at the Blechhammer concentration camp. It is late, I am exhausted and I look forward to some hot soup and sleep. There is no hot food, there is no hot ersatz coffee, there are no free bunks. We are placed in the kitchens amongst the empty cauldrons. People crouch on the floor, sit on their haunches or bend over double in the embryonic position; there is no room to stretch out the legs. We all try to catch some sleep.

The second day's walking starts early. On arrival the previous evening, we were kept segregated from the residents of this lager and assembly in the morning is quite quick. We are given some coffee but the Germans only make a cursory count. This is most unusual. The Germans must be in a very great hurry to move us along.

There is nothing to distinguish this day's march from the one the previous day. I woke very tired and as the day draws to its close, I can hardly place one foot in front of the next. I tell the family to walk on alone, that I shall slow down a little and then catch up again. They would not allow that. Erwin and Natzi walk beside me and Papa follows behind; I am boxed in. I drag myself along, mechanically I put one foot in front of the other but after a short while my feet will not quite respond. I cannot really go much further. I am aware of the consequences but I feel that I have had enough, I just want to sit and rest and if that means rest for all eternity, I no longer care. My brothers link me under my armpits and pull me along. Papa keeps walking behind so that I cannot slow down. The underarm support helps quite considerably and after a time I regain the mental strength to go on and I walk easier. The second day's walking finishes at a concentration camp on the road to Gross Rosen KZ. This time we get our hot soup ration and there are bunk beds for us to sleep in. I fall into the bunk and do not wake until the noisy orders for roll-call disturbs me.

Today is the 23rd of January and our third day's walking will soon commence. But, before that, I must get dressed and get myself to the *Appell Platz*. I am too tired to get out of bed. Papa and my brothers are ready dressed when I slowly drag myself off the bunk bed and make an attempt at putting on my jacket. Most of the other people have already left the hut but I am not yet ready. I tell my family to go on for the roll-call and that I shall follow later. But no, we all go together. Finally, I am ready to leave the hut and drag myself slowly to the *Appell Platz*. By the time we get there, the place is deserted. There are a few prisoners milling around, but there are no kapos, there are no SS to be seen anywhere, the towers are unmanned, the Germans and all the prisoners who made it to the roll-call have gone.

In Limbo.

When I day dreamed of being free again, something I did constantly, I visualised some sort of symmetry. I had a mental image of a near instant metamorphosis to a normal state similar to the transformation I experienced on the way here but, in reverse. The Russians would walk into the camp, put us on trains and send everyone back to the place from which he had been abducted. But that was the dream; the reality was different.

After three months in concentration camps we are quite institutionalised and we are at a loss to know what to do. We return to the hut we had left a short while ago to find that some other people have also missed the roll-call. The SS must have been in a panic to leave so many of us behind. The Red Army must be hot on their heels. I expect the Russians to enter the camp at any moment and we shall be free. We decide to sit and await developments: there is really little else we can do. We have some food left so there is no immediate need to go "organizing". By the late afternoon, the Red Army has not entered the camp. There is no sign of them; no rumbling of tanks, no gunfire nor distant cannon fire can be heard. Outside the camp all is quiet. We seem to be in the eye of the storm.

To say that we are now in control of our own destiny is an unwarranted exaggeration. There is total anarchy in the camp, everyone does his own thing, the strongest takes all, the law of the jungle rules supreme.

I now have no detailed recollection of what we did during the next few days. I am sure that much of the time must have been spent reconnoitring and scavenging. But there are some powerful mental images of highlights which made an indelible impression; the memories have faded little in the nearly half century that has passed.

The next day there still is no sign of the Soviet Army. We decide to go out to explore the camp. Papa and Natzi go in one direction, Erwin and I in another. I leave the protection of the hut with not a little uncertainty. We walk along the camp road. There are other prisoners about walking around, looking for who knows what, probably food. In the far corner of the camp we find a mound of soil topped with a layer of snow. There are a few people there scraping away the soil, collecting potatoes. The soil is not frozen, the potatoes are near the surface and they can be removed with bare hands. The bottom of my trouser legs are tied with string to act as a receptacle and I bend down to pick some potatoes. I am just about to push them down my trouser leg when suddenly, unexpectedly and out of nowhere, I hear the unmistakable bellow of a voice of the SS. Down the camp road, a SS officer with pistol drawn, pointing towards the ground. The SS officer must be on his own, there are no others to be seen and the watchtowers are empty. I hear him shout "I'll shoot anyone found pilfering!". It is pointless to attempt to get away, he is likely to shoot. Erwin snatches the potatoes from me and stuffs them down the front of his tunic. I wish that he had not done that. When the SS man reaches us he orders us to line up by the side of the potato mound. He walks down the line like a raging bull, his pistol raised, ready to shoot. I really feel that he is going

to shoot someone at the slightest provocation. Fortunately, no one is holding anything openly and he does not ask us to remove our tunics. After what seems hours, he moves on: the moment he is out of sight we scatter to the four winds. I am quite shaken by the experience. Next time I go picking potatoes, there is a dead body sprawled across the mound. Nazi and Papa struck lucky, they found the provision stores and return with some tins.

Now I understand why the Russians have not entered the camp: we are in no-man's-land, in limbo. The SS officer and whoever might have been with him do not stay and we are on our own once again. We reason that he was part of the rearguard and that the Russians will be here soon. A day goes by and then another. Meantime, we need food and hunger soon makes me minimise the risks of roaming. We go in pairs and on one "excursion" that Nazi and I undertake, we wander into the deserted SS camp and discover a large pigsty. We hear the squealing of a pig. When we enter, we find a single, big, fat live pig, cornered by a prisoner brandishing a knife. As the man lunges at the pig it escapes from the corner and is chased round and round by three or four people trying to catch and kill it. Pigs are powerful animals; this one is well fed, full of energy and in fear for its life; the emaciated hunters are no match for it. I am sure that the pig would tip the scale on the two of us together. At least so it seems to me. One person manages to get hold of its short tail but he cannot hold on to it for long enough so that the others can catch up. We try and help in the task of bringing down the animal. At last, after much effort, the pig is on the floor; the person with the knife goes straight for its ham and starts cutting into the live flesh and makes no attempt to kill the pig first. The pain must have given the pig the strength and in an attempt to escape, it forces itself to its feet again. The chase starts afresh; the bleeding animal is again brought down, held down and the cutting of the live flesh resumes. The people who first found the pig had not taken much notice of Nazi and I but as we now approach trying to get some of the meat for ourselves, the "butcher" threatens us with his knife. His face exudes violence, his action savagery. There is little doubt that he will use the knife on us if we as much as touch the animal. He is like a crazed animal himself. We leave them to it and go looking elsewhere.

We have now been "free" several days. We expect the arrival of the Russians like we await the advent of the Messiah and like the Messiah, they will not come, we wait in vain. In the night I hear tanks rolling by and I wonder whether they are Russian ones moving forward past the camp or German panzers withdrawing or even, God forbid, returning.

The other few remaining people in our hut are from Bratislava or from some other part of Slovakia. They also missed the precipitous departure on the first morning. There are no formal arrangements between us but we cooperate for the common good. There is now a little less of the "everyman for himself" state of mind: a first indication that now, that we are left to ourselves, we are slowly returning to a normal, more civilised social existence.

I notice that some prisoners are leaving and entering the camp through the open main gate. We too, decide to make a sortie to explore the world that lies beyond the barbed wire perimeter and to see what can be found in the

immediate vicinity of the camp. We are like small children who do not stray too far from their home for fear of the unknown. Very tentatively we approach the gate. Alongside the barbed wire perimeter runs a tarmac road. I look about me, there is nobody in sight. A few tens of meters across the road there is a low rise, flat roofed building and with my heart in my mouth, I take my courage in my hand and cross the road and move towards the building. Technically, I am now an escapee. I expect the others with me must have similar fears. The door to the building is unlocked. We walk in. The rooms we enter were used as offices. Everything is higgledy-piggledy. Desks upturned, filing cabinets open, papers strewn on the floor. It is obvious that we are not the first to enter this building. It has already been ransacked. I do not remember what, if anything, the others find but there is not much left here that is useful to us. We decide to return to the camp. As the others leave, Papa (or was it Natzi or Erwin?) and I chance to look inside a cupboard and there I see a pair of brand new, black wellington boots. I try them on for size. They are a perfect fit. I am well pleased with my find. I keep them on and leave my wooden clogs behind. I am so unused to being outside a camp that I feel quite uneasy. The others have gone ahead and we two leave the building to return to the "safety" of our hut. We step outside, I cannot see the others, they must be back in the camp; we must have spent longer in the building than I thought. We are about to cross the road when I notice two German soldiers coming from an easterly direction. So, the Germans are still about, the Russians appear in no hurry to liberate us. Are the two soldiers a patrol or are they retreating. If they are a patrol, we are done for, I think. They will shoot us for looting. There is a beating of my heart and a pounding in my temples. My first reaction is to run. The soldiers are still far enough away to give us time to get back into the camp and there melt into the crowd and disappear amongst the people remaining in the camp. We hold back, we do not run, we do not hasten our steps but instead keep on moving at the same rate as if we had every right to be there and as if we are not bothered by their presence; this must give them the impression of normality and we are not challenged. We reach the safety of the camp and breathe a sigh of relief. Who would have thought that I would be glad to be back inside a concentration camp.

It is mid morning, Sunday, 28th January. It is a week since we left Gleiwitz. It is misty and grey. It is cold. The hut is unheated but we remain inside its shelter except when foraging. We stand about in the room some munching food, some talking and some just looking out of the window at the camp square. There is a sudden burst of machine gun fire. Instinctively, we throw ourselves to the floor. I am shaken. I suppose we all are. Is this it then? Have they at last come to kill us before the Russians get here? The gunfire ceases after what seems a long time; I am sure that it did not last for more than a few minutes. We remain prostrate for some time after the shooting stops wondering if it is going to start up again. But all remains quiet. By and by we recover our composure and one by one get up off the floor. All in the hut are safe. After a time there is some renewed movement of prisoners and we too, venture outside the hut keen to know what had happened. We are told that the SS from Katowitz, a town to the east of us, passed by the camp entered it in order to dispatch some more of us into eternity. They manned the watchtowers and opened fire, shooting indiscriminately into the barracks. Some people had lucky escapes others got killed. We reason that if the Germans are still in the

neighbourhood it is possible that other units may enter the camp as they withdraw; they may find the time to make a better job of killing us. How many more times will this happen before the Russians enter the camp?

REHABILITATION.

The Road Back.

Many of the inmates have become so institutionalised that they suffer from total inertia. Inertia had become a way of life with them. They are like automata, unable to make decisions and capable of no action other than finding sustenance, unless ordered. Those who remained in their respective camps after the Germans withdrew stayed behind waiting to be liberated. But, the Russians were tardy, they had more pressing demands on their resources. The inmates suffered much privation and hardship before and after the Russians finally entered their camp: many of them became seriously ill with dysentery: typhoid was rampant and many finally succumbed: they died in the camps of infectious diseases and starvation without ever seeing the world outside or regaining the slightest vestige of freedom and self respect. Those who were saved had a very protracted and devious journey back home.

For us, the latest, unexpected visitation of the SS is the last straw. After 121 days in purgatory and a further seven in limbo, we abandon hope of succour from the Red Army. I cannot remember who first suggested it but we decide to take the bull by the horns: we shall wait no longer for things to happen to us but instead make them happen. We shall liberate ourselves; we shall get away from the talons of the eagle with the swastika and find the protective embrace of the Russian bear. Abonyi equivocates; in the end he decides not to join us. We four and seven others from Slovakia decide to take our chance on our own, a true sign of a reborn free spirit. We step outside the camp gate to freedom with the firm intention never to return. The phoenix has risen from the ashes. Physically, I am no longer a *Häftling*: emotionally, I shall bear the scars for a long time. In the light of what we now know happened to those who remained, our decision to abandon the physical protection of the camp for the uncertainties of the road proved to have been excellent.

There is only the one road and it runs parallel to the camp perimeter fence. We turn right, the direction from which we entered the camp. We set off with much hope, some exhilaration and not a little apprehension. It is quite an exquisite sensation not to have armed men flanking me, to be able to walk along the road at my own speed, to stop when the fancy takes me. Butterflies dance inside my stomach with the excitement of it. No more barbed wire, no more *Appell*, no more beating, no more fear of selection, but still hunger, fear of meeting a German patrol, fear of being recaptured and most certainly put to death. The anxieties are unspoken but the hunger is real.

It had been snowing quite recently and there is snow on the verges and frozen slush on the road but I feel quite snug in my newly "acquired" black wellington boots. The roads are deserted, the few houses we pass, unoccupied. It is like walking on an abandoned film set. Only the volume of our voices and the clatter of the clogs on shuffling feet disturbs the all pervading eerie silence. The whole world seems dead and we the only survivors. Suddenly, as if to remind me of this fallacy, a low flying aircraft appears in the grey sky and

opens fire. Who are they shooting at? us? it must be us, there is nobody else about! The incident is over before we can scatter. Was the aeroplane German? Russian? I cannot tell, there was no time to notice markings. Whatever it was, there was no hiding place, we had a lucky escape. Fortunately, the plane does not return to try again. But there is no turning back. We have burnt our bridges; if we want to stay free we must walk on, as fast and far away from the camp as is possible in the direction whence we came.

I visualised a battle front as a set piece: I imagined that a front line has soldiers posted practically within earshot of one another: I saw it as a line on a map just like Papa displayed it in his shop window during the Italian campaign in Abyssinia. By that reasoning the camp we left must be in no-man's-land between the two armies and now that we have moved outside it, we should soon encounter the Russian sentries, I think. Modern war is not like that at all, it is fluid. A move in one direction is safe at one moment and unsafe at the next; a move just a little distance in a different direction and one may be back in enemy territory. This is a frightening realization when it dawns on me.

As we walk along, I notice a flattened human head lying in the road, probably run over by a tank. There is no body, just the head, as flat as cardboard: like a face pressed and ironed by a steamroller. The face has no highlights, it reminds me of a two dimensional drawing of a profile. I am hardened to the thought of gruesome death; I am inured to seeing gory and grisly scenes. This grotesque, surrealistic sight raises in me no greater a re-action than a sense of the curious. Emotionally, I am as detached by this sight as the flattened head is from its missing body.

We carry on walking until the light fades then we stop at a house. The door of the house is unlocked; we walk in. Everything points to a hasty departure. We make ourselves "at home". We look around. At the back of the house there are a few chicken pecking in the gravel. We go out into the yard to try and catch one of them whilst the light still lasts. It is difficult to chase after chicken at the best of times; these chicken are well fed and we are not. They have plenty of energy and we little. We can think strategically, they cannot. Three of us chase a chicken towards a fourth who manages to catch it and hold it by its wings. Who is going to kill it? Suddenly, surprisingly everybody feels squeamish. Spitzer gets hold of its neck and wrings it. We light a fire and cook the chicken. It is our first meal as free men. We gorge ourselves on this delicious rich food.

The house affords good shelter, it is comfortable and warm; my stomach is full; I feel relaxed and it is easy to go into a reverie. I dream of resting up in this place until the nightmare has passed. Then, by some miracle, I find myself transported on a magic carpet back to Bratislava and there meet up with Mamma, Renka and Avri, with relations and friends, everything is back to normal, we take up where we left off. I had not yet accepted that most of them were no more. But, this is not the age of miracles and the battle front is fluid; there is no time to dream; we must press on to put as much distance between us and the front line as is possible.

I look through the books in the house. There is a moment of pleasure when I notice the several volumes of the *Grosse Brockhaus*¹, something I always dreamed of owning. I sit on the floor and lovingly thumb through its pages. There is also an atlas on the book shelves and we turn to the map of Poland. We study it; where is the front line? In what direction shall we proceed? The shortest route back to Czechoslovakia lies directly to the south of us but that would take us into Moravia. Is it still enemy territory? We do not know. So, to be sure, before turning south, it is safer to move first due east in the direction from which we had come. Due east lie Auschwitz and Birkenau. Are we emotionally ready to walk back into the hyena's lair? The hyena could still be in it. It was only yesterday that the rearguard SS came from the east. We decide to strike out north east, to walk towards Czestochowa. This direction takes us away from the net-work of German concentration camps and their retreating army which we thus hope to avoid. Czestochowa does not look too far away; in a straight line on the atlas map it is about 80 km. We tear out the page from the atlas, it becomes our guide.

Next morning we all have an attack of diarrhoea. The meal of the previous night was too rich; we overloaded our shrunken stomachs and our digestive systems could not cope. The toilets are blocked but there is some toilet paper. I shit in the yard and piss into the wash basin. I have become quite unsocial. Perhaps, symbolically, I shit on the whole world.

We left the KZ with our only possession the blankets taken off the bunk beds and the prison uniforms we wear. Before we leave the house, we search through it looking for useful things to take. Blankets, tins of food, clothing that fit somebody in our group, anything that the previous occupiers left behind and that may be useful to us. Papa finds a small canteen of knives and forks and takes it. We are really looting, plundering and pilfering but that does not seem to bother us. I have no scruples about it: I owe nothing to decent human behaviour, I was treated inhumanely: I have no debt to society, society abandoned me and, most certainly, I have no consideration for the property the Germans left behind, they have deprived me of mine. It is a tentative attempt at levelling the score: the robbed collecting their due by robbing. We find a sledge and load it with the few things we managed to "organise". I want to take the *Grosse Brockhaus* but Erwin forbids this unless I carry it myself. I do not see the point because the books would be on the sledge which is loaded with everybody's possessions and we all share in pulling it. Papa does not interfere; he has long since surrendered his parental authority and acts on the decision of his children and Erwin's word seems to be law. Reluctantly and complainingly I leave the books behind. We move on. I remember the date clearly, it is the 30th January. It is Hansi's birthday and I wonder how he is coping in his hiding place.

I cannot remember how long it took to reach Czestochowa, perhaps two days, perhaps three, perhaps longer. I do not remember seeing other refugees on the road but Erwin tells me that there were many moving in different directions. There are no memorable highlights. I do not recall where we slept nor what we ate. Nor can I tell if, or at what point, we crossed the front line but I do not

¹ German encyclopaedia.

remember meeting any Russian soldiers until we enter the town. The Russian kommandatura is housed in a large building, a caserne, surrounding a huge central square used for parading and drilling soldiers. There appears to be general disorganization. We report to the soldier on duty. The verbal contact is sparse. Our dishevelled state and our prison uniforms speak for themselves. We use one and two word sentences; "we Czech"; "going home". I recognise a few Russian words. We show our tattooed arms. The fact that we are from Czechoslovakia and that we are trying to get back home, I think, helps. He directs us to a part of the building and there we are allocated the boiler room for our quarters. The furnace is lit and the room is warm; that is a bonus. We are the only occupants. There are no beds, just a little straw placed on the concrete floor. There are no toilet or washing facilities. This is no luxury. We are quite used to roughing it; we did not really expect hotel accommodation. I suppose that Russian soldiers have no better quarters. A few times a day, a janitor comes into the room to put more fuel into the boiler. We are told where to find the soup kitchen. The food does not taste much better than what the Germans gave us but there is more of it.

A Russian film crew appear. They look a severe and sullen lot: they are taciturn and they treat us like dirt. The man with the cine camera indicates to us that he wants us to line up. He films us: he is not interested in us as people only in us as propaganda. He takes a close up of Natzi for posterity: he must look the most emaciated. He asks his name and records it as Isidor Leonivitch Salamon.

Right through our stay in concentration camps we were free from fleas and lice. The Germans made sure of that. A few days into freedom and one night under Russian control and we all start itching and scratching. It is obvious that the straw in the boiler room is not clean; whoever used it before us must have been infested. This is a misfortune because we have no clean clothes to change into. We find a cauldron and stand it on some bricks in the parade ground. There is plenty of wood about with which to light a fire. We fill the cauldron with water and bring it to the boil. A few of us strip and remain in the boiler room whilst their clothes are boiled and brought back to be dried near the boiler. This is done in rotation so that by the time the last are ready to strip, the first lot of clothes are dry and their wearers take over the boiling. We are careful not to come in close contact with those still infested.

In the course of this procedure three middle aged, middle class German speaking women pass by in the yard. Natzi orders them to stand over the cauldron to keep the water on the boil and using a piece of wood to stir the clothes inside the boiling water. They protest, "we were anti nazi" they claim. We are not yet ready to accept that plea as a mitigating circumstance: to our mind there were not many Germans who are not nazis and strangers do not get the benefit of the doubt. There are too many of us and they do as they are told. We are becoming vindictive - we are showing the master race who is in charge now, let them know what it is like to be coerced; let them do a demeaning job: let us humiliate and humble them. After a few minutes we relent and let them go.

The procedure takes most of the day and in the evening, having burnt the straw and swept the floor as best we can, we all sleep on the concrete in a different area of the boiler room.

We are starved of news. We make sorties into the centre to find out what is happening. In passing, I look at the newspaper headlines to learn a little of the progress of the war. It tells of different towns in Poland that had been liberated but there is no headline news about Slovakia. We find the central square with the large cathedral and the railway station. Whilst at the station we notice that some trains are running. There is no timetable. We are told that there is a train to Cracow once a day, usually early in the morning. That is useful information. Cracow is some 150 km south from here and south of Cracow lie the Tatra mountains and Slovakia beyond. It is the direction we shall have to travel if we want to get back home. On one occasion we sell some items that we have “organised” on the way and our group now have a few zloty to spend.

We are summoned to attend the Soviet officer in charge. We fantasise that being from an allied country, he wants to give us better treatment. We decide not to let on that we are Jews. We turn up at the office and wait in an ante room, and we wait...and we wait...The Russians are never in a hurry; it is always “seechas”, immediately, but it never is. I am sure that the officer has more pressing duties than attend to displaced people; I am a little worried what the officer really has in mind for us. At long last we are taken into his presence. He sits at his desk, big and burly. He has a round Slav face with high cheek bones. Slavonic languages have many words in common and communicating at a simple level between Russian and Slovak is possible. When the officer speaks I manage to understand several words in each sentence. He tells us about fighting the nazi beast; if I get the drift right, he wants us to enlist into the Soviet army. He asks if we were Czechs or Slovaks and one of us blurts out that we are Jews. His face and his voice drop and he instantly loses interest in us and dismisses us. On the way out, one of our group is annoyed that we let on that we were Jews but the rest of the company is quite happy not to be drafted into the Red Army; in our present physical state we would not last many days. As I now know, several people returning from a German concentration camp were drafted into the Soviet forces.

We decide that it is time to depart Czestochowa before the Commissar changes his mind and puts us into uniform. I had read about forceful enlistment in the Czar’s army and I cannot believe that the Russian attitude will have changed much since. Next morning we go to the railway station and find the train to Cracow ready waiting on the platform. There are some carriages coupled to an engine but most of the train consists of empty freight trucks. There is nobody there to collect the fare; this is just as well because we have no money with which to pay. We climb into a truck. I recall our outward bound journey; this time, on the homeward stretch, there is plenty of room in the truck. I am now impatient to get back to normality; each kilometre further south means a kilometre nearer home but annoyingly, the train remains stationary. The Russian soldier guarding the platform smiles and tells us that the train will leave “seechas”. We smile back. Some hours later the train steams out of Czestochowa.

The train travels slowly, it stops and starts again and the journey takes most of the day to complete; we are quite pleased with the progress, it would have taken many days walking. At Cracow station the station master puts us up in his office. Cracow is a big city, it had been liberated only a week or so. There is not much destruction to be seen. This time we report to the Polski Komitet Narodni (I think that is what it was called) rather than the Russian Kommandatura. The member of the Komitet who interviews us asks to see our identity papers. I still half expect to identify myself as B-13692. We bare our left arms, our numbers are our only identities. Explanations follow. The Pole consults some other people in his office and they issue each one of us with a hand-written paper which states our name, place of origin and explains that we are returning from a German concentration camp and that we are on our way home. The papers are signed by one of the members and an official rubber stamp is impressed on it. Now I no longer feel a ciphers, I am a person with a name, I have my identity back. The document helps when we have to deal with the Polish authorities.

We hear the latest war news. The Soviets have penetrated quite far west and north of the Tatra mountains but south of these mountains in Slovakia, they have not made much progress. Most of the country including Bratislava is not yet liberated. We shall have to move further east before turning south. We remain in Cracow only two or three days. We learn from the station master that there will be a train to Sucha, a place 50 km further south and, in a straight line, only about 10 km from the international border. Although we know that we shall not be able to cross into Slovakia in that area, we still decide to make this our next stop on the itinerary and then move eastward along the border within striking distance of crossing it.

In Sucha we find a batch of broadsheets written in German but published by the Soviets. The paper contains an article by field-marshal von Paulus, the man who surrendered himself and his army at Stalingrad. In the article he exhorts the German population to rid themselves of Hitler, his gang of henchmen and to lay down their arms. We are starved of reading matter and Papa decides to pick up a few copies and bring them along. We do not stay in Sucha but once again start walking. There is still much snow on the road. We have our possessions on the sleigh; we take turns in pulling it along. Papa's wooden clogs are very uncomfortable and he has much difficulty walking. We pass through Makow and Rabka; we are aiming for Nowy Targ, another 20 km distant. The roads along which we walk are minor roads and we meet no people or vehicles. It is not at all like one sees on films, there are no masses of refugees with their belongings clogging up the roads. People prefer the safety of their homes and who wants to be on the road in a war zone unless necessary. It seems that only we have the driving force to be on the move. Towards the late afternoon we see in the distance behind us a cart and horse. It draws near; an old man with a wizened weather-beaten face is holding the reins. He wears a Russian military tunic; it seems to be a supply cart. We ask for a lift; he is willing but there is room for only two. It is decided that Papa and I should mount the cart, we appear to be the weakest link, most in need of the lift. We arrange that we should alight at the first cross road and there wait

by the side of the road for the rest of the party to catch up. We say good bye believing that we shall see them a little later.

As the road twists and turns we lose sight of them. It is difficult to talk to the Russian soldier, he cannot understand us. The cart rattles along and we just sit, glad to take the weight off our feet. After what seems a very short time the cart turns off to the left and we alight. Our people cannot be far behind. We stand and wait. Without moving, we feel the cold. Up the road, in sight of the minor fork in the road there is a farm house. We decide to walk up to it to ask for shelter and food and observe the road from there. The farmer and his wife are friendly and give us some hot soup and a little bread. We do not both go inside, one of us will remain on look out for the arrival of our party. I ask Papa to take the first turn inside the farm house.

To keep warm, I walk up and down a little, stamp my feet, rub my hands. Time goes slowly. Papa takes his time. It seems a long time waiting and there is no sign of the party down the road. They must be walking very slowly or else must have stopped for a rest. At last, Papa relieves me. The hot soup and bread warm my inside. Papa must feel the cold even worse than I; he keeps coming inside the house to warm himself. We cannot see the road from the room we are in and I am worried that our people will pass the house without realising that we are inside. With Papa being in and out, I decide to cut short my time at the farm house to keep Papa company outside. We wait and we wait - it seems a very long time and there is still no sign of the party. We only stayed on the cart for a few minutes and they cannot be that far behind. I feel sure that they must have passed when Papa was inside the house. After a time, I get impatient. I suggests that our party must now be ahead of us and we should try and catch up with them. Papa is sure that he did not miss them but, because I seems so sure, he agrees to walk on along the road. There is no sign of them on the road and when we come to the first cross road and they are not there waiting for us, I am worried. What could have happened to them. They cannot disappear just like that. There is no military activity in the neighbourhood, we have heard no shooting. Did they perhaps turn left at the small fork road? There is no way of finding out. It gets dark very soon and we have to find a place to sleep tonight; there is no point in waiting any longer. There is still hope that we may meet up with our party at the next town. We walk on but slacken our pace a little.

In time, I can see Nowy Targ in the distance. It is early afternoon when we reach its main cross road. There is some military traffic on the roads; Nowy Targ appears to be a Russian garrison town. In the middle of the cross road stands a young Russian soldier with his tommy gun slung across his chest, directing traffic. We must look an odd pair walking down the road in our striped prison uniforms carrying nothing but blankets on our backs. Two emaciated faces. One old, one young. We smile as we try to pass. He calls: "*Stoy!*"¹. We stop. "*Bumashka!*"², he demands. I have come across this word before. I take out of my pocket the paper with the official stamp that the Polish Committee gave me in Cracow. Papa does the same and we hand them over to him. I am not sure whether the soldier is able to read Russian, he cer-

¹ Russian: Halt!

² Russian: Identity papers!

tainly cannot read Polish. He barely glances at the documents. He frisks us and finds the knives and forks on Papa and what is more ominous the several copies of the German broadsheet. I try to explain but even if we could communicate, he is not listening. “*Davay!*”¹ he orders, pointing across the road to a building, walking behind us pointing his machine pistol at our backs. I am sure that our faces must have told of our anxiety. We have escaped the nazis and we are going to be shot by the Russians so close to home territory.

Walking across the road I whisper to Papa not to speak German whatever happens. The Russians are unlikely to notice his very rudimentary Slovak. We are made to enter the building and are taken into an upstairs room. The room is small and full of Soviet soldiers sitting on the floor around the wall. There is no furniture and we are sat together amongst the soldiers. Next to Papa a huge Mongol and next to me a small middle aged Russian private. There is no enquiry, nobody questions us, nobody seems to bother us. We just sit and wait. At least they are not going to shoot us out of hand. We hardly speak nor are spoken to. After a while I bare my left arm to the private sitting next to me and show the tattoo number. He shows some interest. That is encouraging. I point to Papa and explain in simple monosyllabic words that he is my father, pointing to me I say Czechoslovakia and to the number on my arms saying Germans.

We are given the same food as the soldiers. It is borscht². It has some meat in it. The Russian military canteen is definitely not haute cuisine. We spend our first night on our behinds sitting on the floor and dozing. The following day we are taken into an adjacent room. An officer sits at a desk; on it the cutlery and the newspapers. He starts asking us questions. He is not aggressive. He points to the papers. He wants to know about the German newspapers: he must think that we have come to subvert the locals with nazi propaganda. I answer in case Papa has difficulty with his Slovak. I use key words and actions. “Paulus, Stalingrad”, a hand movement to indicate “finished”. By the expression on his face, the officer knows about von Paulus and appears to understand what I am saying. I bare my arm to show my number. “Camp, we Jews, home Czechoslovakia.” We are taken back into the room and sit in the same place as before. Soldiers come and soldiers go. Papa and I sit, there is nothing else we can do. I wonder what they are going to do with us. After a time the middle aged soldier who had sat next to me comes back and sits down. Out of the blue he says to me “*ir redst mammelooshen?*”³ My face lights up and I answer “*takke*”⁴. The ice is broken. We tell him who we are, where we had been. We explain about the newspapers and the cutlery. He proudly shows us some drawings of Russian tanks and aeroplanes shooting at the Germans which his small son had sent him. We feel relieved, the worst is behind us. Surely they are not going to shoot us now.

He leaves the room without saying any more but comes back a few minutes later and tells us that we are free to go. The relief is indescribable. We are not offered back the cutlery or the newspapers and I am glad to be rid of both. We

¹ Russian: Let's go!

² Russian beetroot soup.

³ Yiddish: Do you speak Yiddish? (literally, do you speak the mother tongue).

⁴ Yiddish: Of course.

walk through the door into the street, free once again. The soldier on point duty is the one who arrested us two days ago. He looks at us and makes a move to stop us again. My heart sinks. There is a voice from behind shouting something in Russian. It is the Jewish soldier who had interceded for us. We are at last free to pass.

We do not know what has happened to the rest of our party; perhaps a similar experience to ours. If they did come this way, they will be well ahead and there is no point in chasing after them; if behind, we do not wish to linger here to wait for their arrival. There is a main road from here to Zakopane which lies on the international border and there is a minor road leading further east before it crosses into Slovakia. We decide against the major road because it will carry more military traffic and, after our recent experience, we shall try to avoid meeting the military if we can: also the road climbs past the high summits of the mountain range. Taking the minor road, we have a day's walk ahead of us to come to the vicinity of the border. The road is empty, there are no houses and as it gets dark we wonder where we would find shelter. We are lucky, we see an isolated cottage ahead some distance off the road and we make for it. The man who opens the door to us is surprised to see us. He gives us some food and we talk. He is the forester in charge of the forests on the mountainside. It turns out that his is the last house in Poland and that Slovakia is just the other side of the mountain. He tells us that the area has been cleared of the Germans only a few days ago. We spend the night at his house and in the morning after he has given us some breakfast, he points to a minor track; if we follow it, it will keep us off the main road and it will lead into the first Slovak village.

The cottage is some distance up a hill side and the path we are to take is quite well marked, it winds and climbs steadily. Papa who has been having difficulty with his clogs had strung some string around their top and sole to try to stop them from separating. He has now to stop quite often to fasten the knots. He finds the climb quite exhausting; he picks up a stout branch and uses it as a walking stick to help him along. As we climb, there is more snow about, the forest thickens and it becomes more difficult to follow the path. We make only slow progress and we cannot tell how long it will take us to get to the other side.

Suddenly, there is a rapid firing of what I assume must be automatic guns. We stop talking and freeze in our tracks. Is this it? Are there still some Germans about who the Russians have not managed to flush out? With the branch Papa draws a large circle around himself in the snow and asks me to step inside it. He does not explain why. I remember reading stories of the ghetto where people draw magic circles around themselves for protection against evil. Papa may believe in the magic of the circle, I do not and defiantly I remain outside it. The gunfire ceases and after a time we move again this time more subdued, with a little fear of what may lie ahead of us. By the early afternoon we reach the summit without mishap. It is a clear day and we look down into the valley below. It is our home country at last. The thought gives a warm glow inside me and there, within a little distance, is the village. We are home! we have

made it! This is the excitement that Moses must have felt when he saw the Promised Land from a mountain top from across the river Jordan.

We start the descent. I feel like running all the way down the mountain, not that I would be able to. Papa's progress is getting slower and slower. The soles of his clogs are coming apart, the string has worn away; he has to stop at very frequent intervals. It is easier for me, I have solid wellington boots on my feet. When we are nearly at the level of the valley, the village seems hardly any nearer. We are getting more tired and our progress is getting slower by the minute. Before long it will be dark and we need shelter. We see the lights being lit in the windows of the cottages and we manage to get to the first house in the village just as night falls.

The peasant who opens the door is not at all pleased to see us. We now have no communication difficulty, but he does not invite us in. There is no warm welcome "come in compatriots, I'm happy to see you back home safe." It is now too dark to go searching for shelter and I nearly beg him to be the good Samaritan. It takes some persuasion to let us in and permit us to sleep on the floor in the kitchen. There is just he and his wife and they grudgingly give us a little soup. I ask if he has an old pair of shoes that he would give Papa. No, he has not but he is prepared to make a pair of soft shoes for Papa out of one of our blankets if we give him the other as payment. We strike the bargain. It will take him a day to make the shoes; we can stay there whilst they are being made.

Next morning, rather than sit around waiting, I decide to go into the next nearest town, some kilometres away, to find out whether our party has arrived there or whether they had been seen to pass through. The peasant tells me that it would take me about two hours to walk. That does not sound too bad. It is a clear day with a blue sky, there is some snow about but the road is level and I set out with a will. I arrive at mid-day and go to the police to enquire but I draw a blank. I eat a little bread and set off on the return walk hoping to be back soon. Walking briskly for the first few hours in the morning was not difficult but now, on the way back, I am no longer fresh and the road seems endless. My walking gets slower all the time but I do not want to stop to rest, I am afraid that it will get dark before I get back to the village. I try to walk with a rhythm. The temperature starts to drop and I feel the cold despite the body heat generated by walking. I have little energy left and dusk falls and it gets darker and darker and I can follow the road only because of the snow that has collected by its side. I am aware when I veer off the road only because of the snow mound by the side arrests my progress. I dare not sit down; I feel that I may not be able to get up again. I push myself as hard as I can and carry on for another few yards. I have an uncontrollable desire to sit and rest; the kilometre stones that stick up a little out of the snow invite me to sit and rest. At the back of my mind, there is the vague memory of reading that sitting down in the cold to rest will lead to sleep and to hypothermia; I would freeze to death. Compared with the long march of a few weeks ago I now want to stay alive. It now is simply mind over matter. I push my tired body harder but I am not sure how much longer I will be able to walk before my knees give way and I drop. All sorts of thoughts race through my tired mind, fear that I shall not make it, amongst them. It would be a cruel irony of fate if, after all that I

had endured since that night last September, I were now to perish. I cannot give up now. I push the pace a little harder. I am bleary eyed, but what is that I see in the distance? is it a shimmer of light? is it a mirage? I blink very hard and look again. Yes, it is faint but it is still there. This gives me new strength and purpose. I drag myself along and the light gets stronger: yes, it is the village at last. It takes at least another half hour to reach the cottage. Papa was getting very worried and the relief at my safe return reflects in his face; but I collapse in a heap and go to sleep.

Full Circle.

When, towards the end of February, my father and I arrived in Kezmarok we had come full circle, physically; we were in our own country once again. We asked passers-by directions to the synagogue. It appeared that a few Jews had survived in the town by being *verbunkert*, hidden in spaces excavated under floorboards by decent gentile friends or, at much greater risk to themselves, by strangers for money. They were safe for so long as the money lasted. The few of the Jewish community who had survived in this way, allocated us a small furnished flat, rent free, gave us provisions and money. They were, as expected of fellow Jews, full of charity. They wanted to be told of our experience: had we come across their father, brother, son had we met so and so. We, in turn, wanted to know had my two brothers passed through their town. No, they had not.

A week or two later I caught a chill which developed into a fever. I consulted a doctor who happened to be one of the surviving Jews. He arranged for my stay in a sanatorium in the mountains.

The sanatorium was in Horný Smokovec, a small resort in the High Tatras. Clean clothes, a clean bed, good food, fresh air. Pleasant memories of an earlier holiday as a very young boy. During the day, the patients lay in deck chairs on the terrace, wrapped in a blanket to keep warm, soaking-in the glory of a winter's sun in a blue sky with beautiful mountains as a backdrop. Since I required no active treatment I could come and go as I pleased. I walked about in my striped prisoner's jacket and in my black wellington boots and I felt as free as a bird.

I started to read again. The library was well stocked. My previous reading was mostly German literature and poetry but I had read European and English literature in translation. I especially remember reading Dickens's "Grandfather clock". I now attempted my first book in English. Oscar Wilde's "Happy Prince". It is really a children's story and I managed quite well with a dictionary. I found a collection of Shakespeare's plays in translation. Shakespeare was known to me as a famous playwright but I had not read any of his plays. As chance would have it, I pick the "Merchant of Venice" without being aware of its plot. What balm to read "has not a Jew eyes?....if you prick us, do we not bleed? if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison us, do we not die? and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?"

In the evening we played a great deal of chess and did a lot of talking. The language of conversation was Slovak. Amongst the patients I met two Jewish brothers, twins, from Prague. We became quite friendly. They had been to Auschwitz and were used by the notorious Dr. Mengele who tried to prove nazi racial theories by experimenting on Jewish twins. I also met a young man with tuberculosis who came from near Bratislava. He was German speaking. I did not ask into his background. We often walked the corridors speaking German.

It is March, the war had not yet ended, Bratislava and most of the rest of the country is still under the German jackboot and the Red Army is very much in vogue. They are the liberators and communism is the flavour of the day.

I was giving much thought to my personal future and to the future of the country. How could one make sure that such dreadful events could never happen again. Without using so many words, I realised that to safeguard the future one needed to be politically active. When the communist party arranged for a speaker to address the patients at the sanatorium, it was my chance to attend my first political meeting. The speaker was a lanky man in his mid-thirties, dressed in the uniform of a gendarme. I remember nothing of his peroration. At question time I rose. "What do you propose that the new government should do to help to rehabilitate those returning from concentration camps". An innocent enough question, I thought. Up gets one in the audience. How dare I ask such a question when I still spoke German. I retorted that I was under the impression that the allies were fighting nazism not the German language nor German culture. A voice from the back: "*Židia sa zase rozkrikuju*"¹. Given the changed geo-political circumstances I now expected the speaker to admonish such blatant anti-Semitism. He rose and told his audience that whilst amongst the partisans they had a lot of lice; they wanted to rid themselves of all the lice but some managed to escape. Comparing me to a louse of which he could not rid himself, demonstrates his real attitude. The man in the gendarme's uniform may now be a communist and may have spent time amongst the partisans. In view of his response, my reasoning was simple. If he considers Jews as lice now he most certainly would have treated them as vermin a few months earlier. He is a gendarme now - he must have been a gendarme under the fascist Slovak government. Was he one of the gendarmes who helped with the rounding-up of Jews? A feeling of *déjà ecouté* overcame me. This is where I came in - I had come full circle, emotionally. *Plus ça change plus c'est la même chose!* Young as I was (I was not yet 18) I knew quite intuitively that as far as the old country was concerned, this was the end of the road for me.

¹ Slovak: The Jews are opening their gobs again.

POSTSCRIPTS.

Sequel.

At this juncture in my life I had come to a watershed. Within less than a year, I shall be leaving the family home and setting out to start a new life in a new country. A new sense of adventure stirs in me. My experience in Britain, despite the occasional niggling anti-Semitism that came my way, real or imagined, will prove to be the source of my rehabilitation as a person if not as a practising Jew. But it is not my intention to continue my story beyond this point.

After the war I wrote to the International Red Cross in Geneva enquiring whether there was any record either of Mamma or of Renka. The response was negative. The letter stated that their last recorded address was in the Judengasse but that their further fate was unknown. Since the names of those who went into the gas chamber on arrival at Auschwitz remained unrecorded, it is thus certain that they both perished in the gas chambers on the night of the 4th to 5th October 1944. They died a nameless statistic. The only memorial to Mamma and Renka that will survive our own memories of them is chiselled in stone on Papa's tombstone where their names and fates are recorded and now here.

Avri survived the war in a small town north of Bratislava using his assumed identity of Andrej Sýkora. He worked as an accountant and met up with a Jewish woman and her young daughter who had come from Prague and he befriended them. They too, survived the war. Because Avri is of small stature, he had false papers which showed that he was exempted from army service. In March, during the Russian advance south of the Tatra mountains, when I had been free for some weeks already, all men who were not in the Slovak army were recruited to dig trenches. During one such session when Avri was shovelling earth to build barricades, the men next to him said: you look like a Jew. This time Avri's courage did not fail; he did not hesitate: using the choicest vulgar swear words he could think of he called the man all sort of names. The man did not call Avri's bluff and desisted from further innuendoes. In 1947, Avri married Renée Laufer, a girl from Poprad, who he had met before the deportations. She was put in one of the early transports of girls who, in 1942, were deported to Auschwitz. She was one of the very few who managed to survive. She suffered with ill health for the rest of her life. They emigrated to Palestine prior to the establishment of the State of Israel.

We met up with Natzi and Erwin after some weeks of separation. They had waited at the cross road for a time but when we did not turn up they were persuaded by the rest of the party to move along. By good fortune they managed to get a lift on a Russian army lorry that took them all the way into Czechoslovakia. They passed through Kežmarok several days before we arrived there but they did not stay and moved on to Poprad, a town farther inland. In the days immediately after the war when Jew met Jew the conversation was standard: what is your name, where are you from, which

concentration camp had you been in or were you in a bunker. As chance would have it I met a young man who had been to Poprad and had met Erwin and Natzi there. He remembered their surname and their home town and immediately associated it with my own and our reunion took place a few days later.

Natzi, married, Haya Berger, a girl from Ruthenia, who too, had been an inmate at Auschwitz. They left for Haifa after the creation of Israel. Erwin remained in Czechoslovakia in order to continue with his studies at the University and Papa stayed behind with him. However, later Erwin decided to complete his studies at Haifa and he and Papa left for Israel. Papa lived with Natzi and at the age of 60 he started a little laundry business. He died of a heart attack in November 1973 aged 84 years having led an active life to the last.

Margalit, her mother and brother survived the war in hiding. Her father was sent by Brunner to the Theresienstadt ghetto where he was liberated by the Red Army. Later, they all left for Israel.

The bunker in which Hansi Abeles and his family were hiding was uncovered by a police informer. They were taken by the local fascists and handed over to the SS. This was about the time that I walked out of the concentration camp a free man. It was fortunate for them that they had not been arrested earlier because by this time the Auschwitz extermination camp was longer available to the Germans. Hansi's mother and sister were transported to the Theresienstadt ghetto but he and his father were taken into Germany proper and their liberation only came with the end of the war. Hansi caught typhoid and he survived only because of the persistence of his father who, after the liberation when people started moving out of camps, wheeled him about in a wheel barrow. The whole family had a happy reunion after the war and moved to Israel.

On a short return visit to Czechoslovakia in 1947, I chanced to meet Gärtner in a train travelling from Bratislava to Prague. I had lost touch with him in Blechhammer and until that moment did not know if he had survived. We reminisced about our common experience. I since heard that he died a few years ago.

Abonyi left for Israel but later relocated and now lives in Canada.

The nazis were, as we already know from Papa's experience when he was selected to be gassed, very methodical in recording all those who died after they had entered the camp. Immediately after the war, before the days of Xeroxing machines, we were given lists of names to copy that were found at Auschwitz. They contained some personal details of individuals and the date when they were murdered by the nazis. Among the long lists of names, I discovered the names of many school friends and amongst them also the name of Egon Szanto, my erstwhile childhood friend. What a waste of human talent! I also noticed the name of the brother of a girl I then knew. It was my unenviable task to write to her to impart this sad news. There was the consolation that the parents who were orthodox Jews now knew the date of his death and were able to say the kaddish for their son on its anniversary.

Epilogue.

Now, having completed the task I had set myself, I am glad that I found the memories of my childhood not unpleasant, mainly uncomplicated and writing the recollections of the concentration camp not the trauma that I feared it might be. This must be a sign that the wounds are healed and the scars hardly showing. However, as I looked back across half a century to write my story, trying to make sense of my experience, I had great difficulty in coming to terms with the reality of what had happened to me. At first, I looked back on the dreadful circumstances with some detachment and viewed them as if they had been experienced by some alter ego which, in a manner of speaking, they had. I could clearly see myself under various circumstances but it all looked so far away, rather like looking the wrong way through a pair of binoculars: the memory was there but it was often too remote to touch its mental imagery in detail. Only by mentally enduring the physical experience anew could I recall the trauma of the emotional agony.

When I thus relived the experience, the terror of the past came into focus. As I viewed the images in my mind's eye across fifty years and tried to write them down, emotions of anger and outrage welled up in me and indignation overcame me. By what divine or moral law, by what principles and precepts of ethics were millions of my people exterminated: by what legality was I robbed of a pacific childhood, by what right was my person violated, was I deprived of my liberty, denuded of my dignity. These were not emotions that I remember experiencing so many years ago: the feelings of hostility towards the aggressors apart, I only remember sentiments of resentment and annoyance. I now ask myself why were my reactions so moderate at the time and why did I not feel justifiable fury to be so badly done to?

Why should this have been so? Why did we let it happen? Why did we not march and demonstrate? Why did we not take up arms to defend ourselves? Why? Why? Why?

The obvious answer lies in the fact that from a very early age Jewish children were taught not to make waves, were conditioned by the ghetto mentality passed on through the generations to expect indignities and to accept them as a natural condition of being a Jew. I learnt early in life that Jewish history is full of incidents of individual harassment and mistreatment and that mass persecution was not a rare occurrence.

We were reputed of poisoning wells and of murdering children for ritual purposes. After all, they argued, people capable of killing God and hating Jesus are capable of all crimes. In reality the boot was on the other foot: it was Christendom that poisoned us and killed our children. We were accused of fomenting wars and revolutions for our own selfish purposes when, in fact, such wars and revolutions were instigated by the ruling classes and industrialists to serve their self-aggrandisement and their self-interests. When they had to invent reasons for the deprivation and for the huge losses in human life that

these conflicts caused, a ready-made scapegoat was at hand in the Jewish community: and we had to pay the price. The notoriety of some Jews who dealt dishonestly in their business was, by extrapolation, projected to apply to all Jews. We were charged with a systematic attempt at economic domination and exploitation and of planning to subjugate Mankind. Spurious sources and flagrant forgeries like the "Protocol of the Elders of Zion" was advanced as proof of Jewish complicity and guilt. But, in stark contrast, the many Jews who achieved greatness in many fields of human endeavour were looked upon as Germans and French and English or whatever nationality and their Jewishness was then only of marginal interest. In the same breath we are presented as dangerous innovators and as enemies of true progress. We are charged with falsifying the culture of nations by becoming assimilated and accused of being stubbornly inflexible so that we cannot truly fit into any society. The list of such duplicities is endless. It seems that whatever we Jews do, not only can we do no right, we are universally culpable for sins of commission and omission. I am reminded of a Jewish joke. In it, it is claimed that all human misery is caused by the Jews and the cyclists. The immediate question: "why the cyclists?" evinces the obvious response "why the Jews?"

There are two main aspect that require an answer: How could it happen; why did the world stand by idly, saying little and doing less? and, why did we, I mean we Jews, let it happen to us.

The answers to these questions are many, varied and complex. However, I believe that in the final analysis the explanation lies in the Christian and the Jewish perception of our common history.

For the first part let us look for an answer in the Christian interpretation of history. Jesus did his ministry amongst the Jews not amongst the heathen of the day. Christendom was unable to understand why the Jews rejected the Jew Jesus as the Messiah a belief which, to Christians, was beyond dispute. The spurning by the Jews of Christianity's claims was taken by it as a rejection of the divinely promised salvation of Mankind. The Jews were, therefore, to blame for the paradise not regained, they were culpable for all the misery that Mankind has still to endure: above all, Jews were guilty of deicide. The Jews could not be forgiven for this; they had to suffer the penalty for their heresy. On this basis Christendom justified its hatred and persecution of the Jews through two millennia and called it divine justice. Christendom was not forgiving: individual Christians may turn the other cheek but Christendom does not. Christendom considered Jews outcasts and treated them accordingly. I cannot help but be amazed at the intellectual acceptance of such dreadful punishment of the innocent for transgressions allegedly committed by their ancestors two thousand years ago.

This is not a fanciful analysis. The Augustine doctrine teaches that the Jews having rejected the Saviour are condemned for ever to wander over the face of the earth and since they are guilty of the crucifixion they are destined to be for ever homeless. They are sentenced to become like Ahasuerus, the wandering Jew. But, one need not go back as far as the 4th century. The image of the Jew as a deicide survives to this day. My personal childhood experience apart, I need only look at passion plays for confirmation. The famous play performed

at Oberammergau is a prime example of this: a blatantly anti-Semitic representation of the passion on the cross. It was a great favourite with Hitler and much approved by him. Dietrich Bonhöffer, the evangelist who was killed by the nazis, wrote in 1930, in the days prior to nazis coming to power, that after the crucifixion the Jews must bear the curse for this action through a long history of suffering. Nor did the slander cease with the end of the war and six million Jewish dead. After the holocaust, in 1948, the German evangelical conference in Darmstadt proclaimed that the holocaust is the judgement of God for the Jews' rejection of Christianity. From their point of view they may well believe this to be so: while we Jews as a nation paid the penalty for our ancestors presumed guilt, God prospered the hands of the nation that murdered us. The way I see it, if there is anything worse than denying the holocaust, then surely, it must be to admit it but to make the victims bear the blame for it. They who make such claims and who wait for the Second Coming should consider that this may not depend on the conversion of the Jews but on the confession of the corporate guilt so that Jesus the Jew can safely walk this earth without being gassed and incinerated.

Only in recent years did a Pope exonerated the Jews of the killing of Jesus. Thanks for nothing! The Pontiff as an individual, as the Bishop of Rome, as the primus inter pares, as Peter's successor, as Jesus's vicar on Earth, should have beaten his breast and publicly cried, for all Christendom, for all generations: "Peccavimus! Peccavimus! Nostra maxima culpa!" By Christianity's own moral values, it is never too late to make that confession and repent. But not even that can give justice to the many millions of Jews who through two millennia suffered because of this deliberate falsehood.

Thus, the image of the Jew as a deicide, the Jew as a usurer, the Jew as a person of ridicule, the Jew as an outsider, the Jew as an outcast who can be killed with impunity was so ingrained in the Christian psyche that demagogues who had to find scapegoats for their shortcomings had a ready made group of people in the Jews to offer as unresisting sacrificial lambs. It is therefore not surprising that the world stood idly by when Germany discriminated against its Jewish citizens in the 1930s. The politicians justified their tacit acceptance of this by saying that it was Germany's internal affair. When, later, Jews were physically abused, the world looked on and made stoical comments: the League of Nations passed no resolutions, there was no boycott of German goods, there were no mass demonstrations, after all, it only affected Jews. There were the few liberals who spoke up but their words fell on deaf ears. We had no one in power to stand up for us. It appeared that even our God had deserted us in our hour of need.

Consider, the time span between the *Kristallnacht*¹ and the first mass exterminations of Jews is a mere four years but the mass murder was two thousand years in the preparation. Hitler's persecution did not start with the gassing of Jews. Things happened by degrees: sometimes insidiously more often blatantly and all in flagrant violation of what we now accept as human rights. Hitler and his nazi gangster got away with it every time. The underlying

¹ "The night of the broken glass". In November 1938 there took place an orgy of arson, destruction of property and murder of Jews on a scale not previously experienced even in Hitler's Germany.

reason for this was the preparation of the populace to act against the Jews or at least tacitly to approve such action. And the preconditions for such approval were already present: the past isolation in ghettos, the centuries old hatred, dislike and discrimination; the anti-Semitism being constantly re-fuelled by xenophobia, by religious bigotry and fanaticism and its fires stoked by demagogues and clerics.

One must be aware that there is a lingering undercurrent in Christian attitudes towards Jews and that anti-Semitism is ready to re-emerge at the slightest provocation. It has become endemic in Christendom, it festered in the past and still does. From time to time there is a flare up, an epidemic outbreak of anti-Semitism: when the infection subsides it does not die, it remains dormant, it becomes once again subcutaneous. Israel Zangwill's¹ comment "scratch a Christian and you will find an anti-Semite" may not be strictly true but it has more than a grain of truth in it.

For the second part one must realise that the Jewish perception is not all that different; the final effect is the same only the assumed cause is different. The philosophy of divine retribution is not wholly a Christian concept. Judaism views the Diaspora and the persecutions as divine punishment for wrongdoing, for straying from the strait and narrow path. This rationale made the suffering more bearable because it held the promise of redemption after repentance. After all, God is merciful. Once again I cannot help but be amazed at the intellectual acceptance of such dreadful punishment of the innocent for transgressions committed by one's ancestors two thousand years ago; the innocent have to repent for the transgressions of the guilty. It appears that we are not only our brother's keeper but our ancient ancestors' as well. However, if one can accept the justness of such punishment, then, from its concept springs the reason for the inertia, the inactivity and the passive, the uncomplaining acceptance of conditions imposed by an inimical environment. Bruno Bettelheim² the psychoanalyst, a survivor of Buchenwald and Dachau, equates ghetto mentality with inertia: "*It was inertia that led millions of Jews into the ghettos that the SS created for them. It was inertia that made hundred of thousands sit at home waiting for the executioners*".

The *Naturei Karta*³ maintain that the holocaust is a divine retribution for Zionism. What a cruel God these people believe in. A God who permits babies to be gassed and consumed by fire to pay for the sins of their elders. Abraham the alleged progenitor of the Jews, smashed his father's idols because he worshipped Moloch the god who must be propitiated by consuming little children. There is here a moral somewhere. Is the fanaticism of these people any less dangerous than that of the extremes of Christian anti-Semitism? It is equally noxious and one is stunned by the arrogance of all people who claim to know the will of God better than anyone else.

¹ Israel Zangwill, *Children of the Ghetto*, book 2, chapter 6

² Bruno Bettelheim, *Recollections and Reflections*, Thames and Hudson

³ An organisation of extreme Jewish orthodoxy which denies the Jews the right to an independent political existence before the coming of the Messiah and is therefore violently anti-Zionist

Finally, It is argued by those who tacitly approved of the discrimination against the Jews that had they known of the “final solution” they would not have acquiesced to the holocaust, or the mass murder or even to individual murder. But a person who helps to entrap a victim is an accessory to the final act and is no less culpable. As a final thought, I feel anger and outrage at the tendency in some circles to exonerate themselves from the guilt of the holocaust by asserting that it never happened. I can do no better than express my disgust in Elie Wiesel’s words: “these people commit double murder: first they kill us physically and then they attempt to expunge the memory of the deed and the dead.”

APPENDIX 1 - THOUGHTS

Memories recalled after one year of freedom

WRITTEN IN MANCHESTER ON FEBRUARY 10TH, 1946 THE 16TH BIRTHDAY ANNIVERSARY OF MY MARTYR-SISTER. (Unedited).

“What now?” Some hours had elapsed and this was my first question I put to my father after our arrival at the concentration camp Auschwitz. My father looked at me sadly as in search for an answer: - but there was no answer. The answer for this straightforward and still so enigmatic question lay in the laps of the gods - if there.

My father’s eyes were an open book - there to be read, yours for the taking. I read it and was filled with horror - horror I couldn’t grasp yet, I couldn’t understand. It spelled Auschwitz!

This one word in all its invariability and monotony meant intrigue - hatred - murder! All that is inhuman and unjust on this Earth.

How true it all proved to be.

I thought about the short physical contact I have had with the “*Kulturvolk*”¹. Physical on my part for they used truncheons. So far it was a short but marked experience. Marked by hate - murder and blood!

By blood! I suddenly remembered a nazi song: “*Bis Judenblut vom Messer spritzt...*”². And like a refrain it sang within me.

Somebody spoke to me but the words were meaningless. I could not hear, I could not see. I was just a marionette. I could not be anything else and I had no wish to be anything else. My head, my hands my feet and every limb and part of my body was suspended by threads and was being moved by those who wished to play with me. I was being moved! I was a marionette!

The only thing that did not work mechanically were my thoughts. They could not take that from me. This was my only satisfaction in my vanity. But I forgot that thoughts were of no avail. I had to be strong - strong in mind and body. That was the call of the time. I had to will to hold out and to know that truth and justice must prevail.

“Truth and Justice”. It sounded so laughable. From afar it echoed - truth - justice! But this echo was weak and soon vanished altogether interfered by a new one, a more powerful one and coming from next to me “*bis Judenblut vom Messer spritzt...*”

And Jewish blood ran and far and unattainable were Truth and Justice.

¹ German: A nation of culture.

² German: Until Jewish blood will squirt off the knife.

It was night - the day had gone - but time was of no consequence. The air was cold and ice-cold I felt within my heart. This night I lost all that is treasured in human life: - my mother, my sister - my freedom and my human dignity. All this was taken from me in one single fateful second.

Flames blazed away from large chimneys. What were they? Factories! Factories? In Auschwitz? And I knew then; They were factories, but factories of death. Death in mass production - they were crematoria.

My human mind could not grasp it all. Human beings gassed and burned, indiscriminately, children in the womb, babies, women, men .. even God himself.

Oh mother! My little sister! No! No! impossible - it can't be. Oh God where art Thou? Justice! And God was far and far was Justice.

APPENDIX 2 - SLOVAK STATUTE BOOK: ORDINANCE NO. 198

(Slovenský zákonník č.198) dated 9th September 1941¹.

Headlines of the Order as to the legal status of Jews

(Nariadenie o právnom postavení Židov).

General Provisions: **Definition of Jew and Mixed Race** (Half- and Quarter-Jew): Paragraphs. 1-5.

Part 1. **Personal status:** Paragraphs 6-56: Registration of Jews; Obligation to wear Yellow six pointed star; Prohibition of marriage and of sexual intercourse between Jew and non-Jew; Disenfranchisement; Exclusion from public service; Prohibition to practice the liberal professions; Forced labour, restriction of personal, domiciliary and freedom and postal secrecy; Restriction of assembly; Creation of the Central Agency for Jews (ÚŽ); Restriction of press freedom and prohibition of publication of literary or other artistic products; Restrictions in religious practice and education; Prohibition of ritual slaughter; Restrictions as to employment and the prohibition to employ non-Jews; Prohibition to be legally represented by a non-Jew; Prohibition to carry arms, to obtaining fishing permits, to drive, withdrawal of driving licence; Travel restrictions.

Part 2. **Property rights:** Paragraphs 57-83: Restriction to acquire Real estate; Obligation to deposit Cash and Saving Pass-books, stocks and share certificates; Loss of State pension rights; Prohibition to own cameras, telescopes, gramophone records; cancellation of leases.

Part 3. **Exclusion from public life:** Paragraphs 84-109: Exclusion from public office; Dismissal from public service; Compensation payments for those dismissed; General provisions relating to exclusions.

Part 4. **Transfer of Property and Real Estate in the country and abroad:** Paragraphs 110-214. Obligation to supply inventory and valuation; Purchase of Real estate acquired by Jews at distraint auctions; Return of profit on resale of Real estate purchased at distraint auction from non-Jew; Execution of reform of agrarian land Real estate belonging to Jews; Transfer of Jewish business enterprises; Transfer of remaining Real estate; Purchase of agricultural inventory.

Part 5. **Fund for the encouragement of Jewish emigration:** Paragraphs 215.

Part 6. **Administration of Property:** Paragraphs 216-232: Temporary administrator of buildings; Trustee and temporary administrator of industrial, commercial and craftsman enterprises; General nominations; Trustees; Temporary administrators; Penal and final orders.

¹ Reproduced and published by Slovak National Museum, Edícia Judiaca Slovaka, Volume 43, Bratislava (2000), Editor in chief Professor Dr. Pavol Mešťan.

Part 7. Defraying the cost of audits, controls and of determining the liquidating and common values of Jewish and “aryanised” enterprises as well as of Jewish property: Paragraphs 233-235.

Part 8. Regulations in cases of taxation and impost: Paragraphs 236-249.

Part 9. General regulations. Paragraphs 250-254: Scope of some terms used in the regulations; General order relating to the efficiency of the regulations with regards to certain persons; Exclusion of complaints at the Highest Law Court and compensation claims at Lower Law Courts.

Part 10. Exceptions and Exemptions. Paragraphs 255-256.

Part 11. Temporary regulations: Paragraphs 257-267: Dismissal of domestic help in Jewish households; Period of limitation on applications to employ Jews; Period of limitation for handing over permits whether cancelled or expired and failure to deposit radio receivers and weapons; Period of limitation for handing over bonds and bank deposit books; Regulations relating to State employees; Forfeit of items to the benefit of the State; Regulation regarding inventory of property; Temporary arrangements for the execution of land reform.

Part 12. Concluding regulations. Paragraphs 268-270:

Comments

1. The German nazi paper the “Völkischer Beobachter” dated 10th September 1941, writes:

“The new definition of a Jew, gives all previously published orders and measures against Jews a deeper meaning of the real Jewish Law.”

2. The editor of the Edícia Judiaca Slovaka¹, states as follows:

“It is a well established fact that at the time of its publication, the ordinances belonged to the strictest anti-Jewish legislative norms in Europe.”

¹ Professor Dr. Pavol Mešťan in the introduction to Nariadenie o právnom postavení Židov.

